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Amateur Gardening

27 February 2016



grow heathers
all year round

Time to sort out the lawn

First cut, plus problems to look out for



Repot lemons
and other types of citrus plant to boost growth



Plants to pollard

Pruning for bigger leaves



Get flowers growing

- Plant a spring container
- Start gladioli for cutting
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this week
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Tim Rumball's Editors letter

OFFICIAL RHS advice for planting seed potatoes is to put them in on a rolling basis over a period from late March to late April, starting with earlies, followed by second earlies and finally maincrops.

Mine all go in at pretty much the same time, over the period of a week. I started doing this after Geoff Hamilton told viewers of Gardeners' World about thirty years ago of an old adage about potatoes: Plant earlies late, and lates (maincrops) early! The idea is that if you plant earlies too early the foliage (called haulm) gets frosted, reducing crops, so you put them in a bit later so that the haulm comes up later and avoids frost.

But you should plant slower growing late, or maincrop spuds as early as you can so they form a crop of tubers under the soil

before blight disease strikes (from early June in a warm year) and you have to cut the haulm off. This is even more important now all chemical controls for blight have gone.

When should you plant? That depends on your local conditions – it's all about the risk of frost after the haulms appear. Most gardens within a couple of miles of the coast, from the Midlands south, should get fewer frosts than those further inland, so can be planted earlier.

But there's no simple rule, as gardeners on the chilly East coast will tell you. Listen to long range forecasts, assess weather trends, look at local conditions, apply local knowledge... then cross your fingers and plant as early as you dare!

Have a great gardening week.

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Your Gardening Week



with AG's gardening expert Ruth Hayes

TopTip

Potatoes can also be grown through holes cut in a sheet of black polythene stretched over well improved soil. You don't need to 'earth up' the haulms, but the method can attract troublesome slugs

I am chitting my 'Foremost' first early potatoes in eggboxes



All Timepic unless credited

Preparing to plant spuds

Late winter is the ideal time to prepare 'seed' potatoes, improve the soil and make it ready for planting, says **Ruth**

I LOVE potatoes, especially when they are home-grown. Nothing beats a bowl of cream-skinned earlies, such as 'Lady Christl' to go with the first of the summer's salads. So I have been 'chitting' this year's early crop, to get them growing as soon as possible.

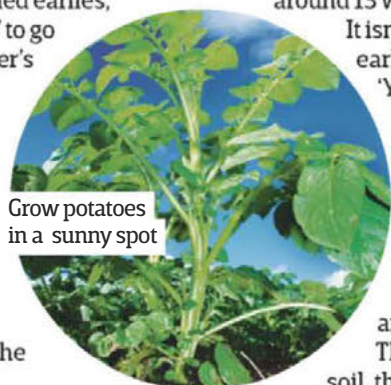
Chitting is when you expose seed potatoes to the light for a few weeks to encourage a few strong shoots to develop. This helps to shorten the time the tubers spend in the soil.

The only potatoes that really need chitting are the first earlies, such as 'Foremost' and 'Charlotte'. Chit them now,

and they can be in the ground between March and May, and will be ready to harvest around 13 weeks later.

It isn't essential to chit second earlies, such as 'Kestrel' and 'Yukon Gold', but you can if you wish. They have a 13-16 week growing time.

The last potatoes to go in are the 'maincrop' varieties, such as 'Desiree', 'King Edward' and 'Sarpo'. These take around 20 weeks to mature. The longer they are in the soil, the more prone they are to problems such as blight, although some varieties, such as 'Sarpo' have been developed to be blight-resistant.



Grow potatoes in a sunny spot

How to chit your early potatoes

It's time to prepare your seed potatoes for a bumper crop of spuds this year!



1 Place your potatoes, 'eyes' (the little indentations) facing up, in an old eggbox somewhere cool and light (a windowsill or frost-free porch is fine), at around 8-10°C (46-50°F).



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2 Once your seed potatoes have got 2-3 good sized 'chits', or sprouts, they can be planted out. If any have any more than 3 chits/sprouts, rub them off before planting.

The best soil for growing potatoes

Where will your potatoes thrive?

- The best soil is one that is deep and moisture retentive, and has been manured the previous autumn.
- Potatoes like slightly acid soil, as alkaline conditions create a good environment for 'scab' (see right).
- Don't grow potatoes on land that was used for brassicas the previous season, as the soil may have been limed.

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Sow aubergines: Aubergines and tomatoes are also members of the potato family. They can be sown now for a summer crop grown



Ways of avoiding potato problems

Pests and diseases attack spuds, but most can be dealt with



Blight affects potato foliage and tubers

1 Blight: Blight is triggered by the 'Beaumont period' – 48 hours when the temperature is stays above 20°C, with 75 per cent humidity, usually starting in June. Blight first appears as brown spots on

leaves. Top growth eventually collapses. Spores are washed into the soil infecting tubers. There is no chemical control. Avoid it by planting resistant varieties, spacing plants well, and destroying infected plants.



2 Slugs: Slugs damage tubers, tunnelling into them. They can be killed or deterred with by using slug pellets or nematodes. Thorough cultivation before planting helps to destroy slug eggs.



3 Potato scab: This bacteria affects potato skins. It is most common in limey soils, such as those brassicas have been grown in the previous year. Lower the soil's pH if necessary with sulphur chips.



4 Potato cyst eelworm: These cause white or yellow cysts, and plant leaves to droop. Prevention includes thorough soil cultivation, and not growing potatoes in infected soils for at least six years.



5 Blackleg: This bacterial disease spreads by contact, especially in cool, wet, poorly drained soil. Stems blacken, leaves yellow, and tubers rot. Remove and destroy infected plants.

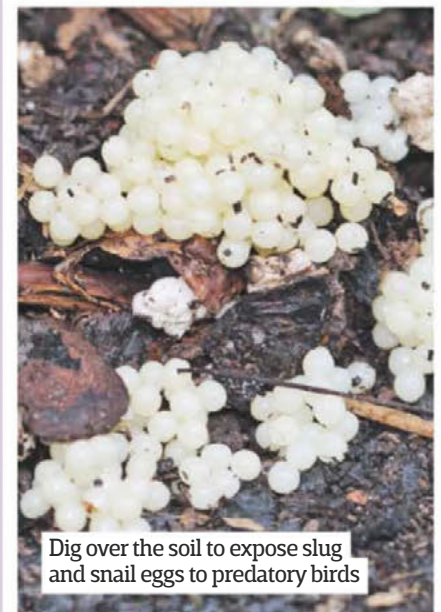
Preparing your soil

Simple steps you can take to create a good growing environment



You can warm the soil using sheets of black plastic

1 Get your soil ready for planting by weeding it well, as weeds compete with the young potato plants for water, light and nutrients. Dig out the roots of perennial weeds. Then warm the planting site by covering it with black polythene, fleece or a cloche.



Dig over the soil to expose slug and snail eggs to predatory birds

2 Before planting your chitted spuds, dig over the soil again. This helps gets rid of eelworm infestations, and exposes buried slug and snail eggs, so they will get eaten by birds. Add lots of well-rotted manure or organic compost, as potatoes are hungry plants.

Your Gardening Week

with AG's gardening expert Marc Rosenberg



This container will bring a splash of colour to my patio during spring

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Spring container

You can banish the late-winter blues by making a springtime display that'll lift spirits on even the coldest days, says **Marc**

FEBRUARY is a frustrating month for gardeners. Occasionally we get a glimpse of the sun and a few hours of warmth, but recent gales and storms have sent most of us scuttling back indoors soon after venturing out.

So, to lift spirits, I decided to create a spring container – a display that will provide instant impact, and remind us that next month is Easter, the traditional start of the gardening season.

It's easy to make a spring display on a budget. Most garden centres simply cram a few primroses into a pot and plonk a dwarf conifer in the middle. Job done.

But add spring bulbs such as narcissus

and outdoor hyacinths (circled), plus a bit of evergreen foliage, and you'll benefit from a display with far more interest.

As gales have been a theme of this winter, I've opted for a sturdy container that isn't top-heavy.

Good drainage is essential, so I've used a decent amount of crocks in the bottom of the pot, before filling with a quality multi-purpose compost.

It's important to water the container after planting, but don't saturate it: springtime

plants need far less moisture than summer-flowering displays.

When the container is past its prime in a couple of months, the plants and bulbs will find permanent homes in my borders.



Essential spring container plants

Marc's top 4 choices for colour:



1 Hellebore The Lenten roses are reliable late winter-flowering perennials. They're especially valuable for brightening up shady corners.



2 Primroses Available in a host of colours, primroses offer huge flower-power. Dead-head spent blooms regularly to keep more flowers coming.



3 Narcissus 'Tete-a-Tete' My top choice for containers, this RHS Award of Garden Merit variety reaches no more than 8in (20cm) in height.



4 Euonymus 'Emerald 'n' Gold' Not a spring plant, but a top choice for foliage interest. I've combined it with ivy, to soften the edges of the container.



Your Gardening Week

with AG's gardening expert Ruth Hayes



Fusarium patch/snow mould strikes in cold, wet weather

The first cut of the year is done with the mower blades at their highest setting

Two simple jobs to improve your lawn

Tackling the effects of winter weather



1 Aerating: Use a garden fork, a spiked roller or special spiked shoes to pierce the turf all over, every 6in (15cm). This aids drainage and improves air circulation.



2 Edging: This is a simple, effective way to make your garden look instantly smarter and tidier. Stand on a plank to get a straight line and avoid turf damage.

Late winter lawn care

As the weather improves, it's time to start working on your lawn to reverse the ravages of winter, says **Ruth**

THIS winter has been a tough one for gardens everywhere. The record-breaking rainfall has saturated many gardens, and left others completely underwater for days on end. This is not good news for lawns.

As the water recedes, it's the time to take stock of the garden as a whole, and the lawn in particular.

This winter is unusually mild, and as grass will keep growing in temperatures above 5C, many people have mowing their lawns throughout. But if you are starting to mow again now, make sure the blade is at its highest setting, and don't mow over waterlogged soil or frosted grass.

Before mowing, brush away worm casts with a twiggy besom broom.

You can also lay turf now, provided the ground isn't frozen or wet. It's a great way to

repair damaged patches. Work from planks to avoid compacting the soil, and don't walk on the newly laid turf for several weeks to give the new roots time to establish and knit the rolls of turf together.

Spring is a good time for sowing a new lawn, so start preparing the soil now, as it needs five or six weeks to settle after cultivation.

Eliminate perennial weeds by spraying, or by digging out the roots. Rotavate or dig over the area to the depth of 8-10in (20-25cm). Add lots of well-rotted manure or compost, and wait until any residual weeds come through, then remove them too.

Once settled and weed-free, rake the area several times in different direction, and rake in 2oz/70g per sq yd/m of general-purpose fertiliser. Seed can be sown when the weather warms up in April.

Deal with diseases

How to tackle Fusarium patch

■ Fusarium patch (or snow mould) is a common winter problem, causing yellowing patches that turn brown. In wet weather, pink or white cottony growths can appear.

■ To beat it by aerate the soil by spiking it deeply with a garden fork. Cut back overhanging plants. Bayer Garden Lawn Disease Control can be applied to snow mould, but don't use it in drought or frozen conditions.

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Your Gardening Week

with AG's gardening expert Ruth Hayes



Citrus trees will enjoy a mix of John Innes No 3 and ericaceous compost

Step by step

How to revive a pot-bound citrus plant

Fresh compost and a bit more root room will rejuvenate your plant



1 Place crocks at the base for drainage, and start to fill it with a loam-based compost, such as John Innes No 3, mixed with some ericaceous compost.



2 Ease the citrus plant from its existing pot, and gently tease out the roots so they're not spiralling. Set it at the same depth as it was growing.



3 When the tree is at the right depth, infill around the rootball, firming the soil as you go to stabilize the rootball and to remove air pockets.



4 Water the plant well, and let it drain. Return the citrus to a light, frost-free spot indoors (a greenhouse or unheated conservatory) until the summer.

Citrus care in spring

Ruth shows you how to revive citrus plants as winter ends

MY lemon tree spent the winter somewhere light and frost-free, but it hasn't emerged looking entirely happy.

It needed repotting and pruning, so I've given it more growing room and some fresh compost to get it growing as light levels rise.

February is a good time to prune, so I've

also cut back two over-long branches by two-thirds, and got rid of a few smaller crossing stems. This should promote healthier, bushy growth.

I finally checked for pests. Citruses are susceptible to mealybugs, glasshouse red spider mite and scale insects, so if you see evidence of these, treat them immediately.

Looking after houseplants in late winter

- Spring may be approaching, but the effects of frosty nights and chilly draughts can still upset houseplants.
- Keep them off windowsills at night, and don't stand them close to fires or radiators, or in cold draughts.
- Continue to irrigate with plain water once their compost has almost dried out. You can resume feeding with a liquid feed when the growing season starts again in March.
- Continue to check for pests and diseases, and treat accordingly.



Houseplants can become infested with mealy bugs (inset) over the winter

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Your Gardening Week

with Peter Seabrook, AG's classic gardening expert

At flower shows bowls of gladiolus spikes make a big statement



Time Inc.

Gladioli for the vase

Peter recalls working with gladiolus to use for cut flowers

GLADIOLUS were one of the most popular cut flower crops on the nursery where I worked in the 1950s. We grew more than an acre of them – mostly the large flowered cultivars. They were also used to stage commercial displays at flower shows, where a dozen or so spikes would fill a bowl – an area a metre or more square. We enjoyed working with them because it was so much quicker to arrange large displays, compared to the more demanding staging of sweet peas and roses.

Three methods were used to get a succession of flowering spikes to cut. First,

the use of early and late flowering named varieties. Second, planting in succession from late February, every fortnight, through to late May. Then corm size – large corms of any given cultivar will grow to flowering more quickly than small corms.

Depth of planting is also important

“We grew more than an acre of them”

because, if planted deep enough, the soil around the emerging stem holds each plant upright without the need for supports, for all except the very tallest kinds. Those commercial crops were planted in furrows at least 4in (10 cm) deep, just as farmers plant potatoes.

The key to good growth and exhibition size spikes is summer moisture. Working in plenty of organic matter with winter soil preparation was essential for growing in dry Essex summers, especially as growers in the north-west, with their much higher rainfall, would leave us standing at shows such as Shrewsbury and Southport.

I find gladiolus are best planted in small groups among hardy perennial flowers in borders. Their sword like leaves thrust up through border flowers and dramatic spikes create focal points.

Peter's tips for growing gladioli



Time Inc.

1 Mix some coarse sand and/or grit well into heavy clay soils to improve overall drainage.



PIS.

2 Increase stocks by potting up the small cormlets produced in profusion by some cultivars.



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3 Butterfly gladioli (pictured) and Primulinus have smaller flowers and are more suitable for cut use indoors.

Your Gardening Week



with AG's gardening expert Ruth Hayes



All Time-lapse (Cristina Morgante)

I am cutting this unsightly branch off my weeping pear (*Pyrus salicifolia*) before it returns to growth in spring

Last chance to prune

Ruth explains why the end of February marks the close of the deciduous pruning and bare-root planting seasons

IT may not always look like it, but spring is in the air, and plants are preparing to return to growth. The sap is starting to flow again, so this is your last chance to prune deciduous trees and shrubs, and plant bare-root varieties.

Many deciduous trees, shrubs and hedges should only be pruned in the winter months when plants are dormant, because if they are cut during the growing season their sappy wounds create an entry point for disease.

Similarly, you can only plant bare-root trees when they are dormant, because they don't like being disturbed when in bud, and beyond.

So you only have a couple of weeks left to remove broken, dead, or out-of-place branches on deciduous trees and shrubs.

This is also your last chance to formatively prune young trees and shrubs, to cut them into the shape in which they will grow in future years.

Late February is the time to renovate an overgrown beech hedge. If the height needs reducing by more than half, stagger pruning over two seasons rather than doing it all at once. Similarly, if the

sides need drastic reduction, then do one side and the top in the first year, leaving the other side to the second year.

■ The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 states that it is an offence to damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while it is in use

or being built. The bird nesting season is considered to run from 1 March to 31 July, or longer if birds have multiple broods... so hurry!



Bird nesting season runs from 1 March to 31 July

Step by step

Sow hardy cyclamen

Hardy cyclamen sit like bright jewels in dull winter borders and can be propagated from seed, with patience.



1 Stems holding ripe cyclamen seedpods spiral to the ground where, if left, they will split and germinate.



2 Open the seedpods and soak seeds for 12 hours to soften them. Drain through a tea strainer or on kitchen roll.



3 Fill 3in (7.5cm) pots with damp seed compost. Sow the seeds on the surface, and cover with more compost.



4 Seal in a plastic bag and place somewhere cool and dark. Germination should take 30-60 days.

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Your Gardening Week

with Lucy Chamberlain, AG's fruit and veg expert



Warm the soil to boost the germination of early seed sowings

Step by step

Warm soil for early sowing



1 Dig over your chosen seedbed, firm it down again gently with your heels and rake it level to remove any stones and large clods of soil. The more you rake, the better your seedbed will be.



2 Place your cloche on top of the seedbed. The raking and extra warmth provides any weed seeds with the exact conditions they need to germinate. Leave for two weeks.



3 Remove your cloche and hoe off the weed seedlings, choosing a dry and windy or sunny day. Hoe shallowly so you don't bring more weed seeds to the surface. You're now ready to sow.

Warm soil with cloches

The first signs of spring are arriving, and **Lucy Chamberlain** speeds things along with her clever use of cloches

CLOCHES and soil covers offer a cheap and easy way to warm up the soil by a few valuable degrees before you begin sowing. Get them in place now as they take a good fortnight to work. If you sow in rows tunnel cloches are ideal, whereas bell cloches work for smaller plots, or sheet plastic for big areas.

There's no need to spend a fortune – just be inventive. Glass is the costliest material but it captures the most warmth. I recycled old caravan windows on my allotment four

years ago and they worked a treat! Online tutorials show you how to remove the base of glass demijohns. Clear polythene is cheap to buy but it retains only a little heat. Rigid plastic costs more and insulates better, so spend your money wisely.

Relatively inexpensive black plastic, laid in contact with the soil, will make the best of the sun's heat. Laying down cloches also helps with weed control, encouraging their seeds to germinate so they can be hoed off before sowing or planting.



Garlic cloves planted now will still produce good bulbs

Plant more garlic!

I planted garlic in the autumn, but being a fan of it I'm getting some more in now. Spring-planted garlic might not give huge bulbs as it's in the ground for less time, but it's a better choice for growers on heavier soil where autumn plantings can rot off. I'm planting 'Solent Wight' which is a softneck type so it stores well. I'm also putting in 'Lautrec Wight', a hardneck which doesn't store for long but it's said to have an amazing flavour and produces flower stalks and buds known as 'scapes'. These provide a bonus harvest for delicious stir fries.

Next week: I'll be demonstrating step-by-step how to prune a blueberry bush to ensure you get the best crop of delicious summer fruits.



Protect peach blossom



All Timelapse unless credited

Peaches are early flowering, so you need to protect the beautiful blossom (inset) against frosts

WHEN we get sunny days in late February, you can feel real warmth in the rays – it's a relief that things are moving forward. Don't get me wrong, I love crisp wintry mornings, but I'm peachy keen to get cracking on the plot today!

Talking of peaches, the kitchen garden at East Donyland Hall is sheltered and the south-facing wall is regularly cloaked in sunshine. It's where we grow fan-trained peaches, nectarines and apricots because they thrive in the warm conditions. Exploiting this sunny aspect boosts the fruits' all-important sugar levels in the summer but it also encourages them into growth very early in spring, which can lead to trouble. These trees are notorious for flowering early in the year anyway, and the blooms frequently get killed by frost. Add to

the mix our sunny brick wall which prompts flowers to form earlier, and life can get very complicated for a gardener.

Modern varieties have often been bred to flower later, or have harder blooms. Peaches 'Dixired' and 'Redwing', along with apricot 'Goldcot' are examples – specialist fruit nurseries can give you more.

But for now, I'm the curator of trees that are 25 years old, so bring on the fleece! We already had clear plastic lean-tos covering these trees to deter peach leaf curl fungus, so I can drape a layer of fleece over the frame to add extra insulation. It's important that the fleece doesn't touch the flowers, and that the ends open so that bees can access and pollinate the flowers. On sunny days I'll roll the cover up so bees can easily work the blooms. I mustn't forget to put it back down on chilly nights, though.



Shutterstock

Plant gooseberries

LAST summer my husband said to me 'I hate gooseberries'. I persuaded him to try some of the yellow-fruited dessert types rather than the hard green cooking varieties he was familiar with... and he loved them!

Consequently we are planting 'Hinnonmaki Yellow' and 'Early Sulphur' in our garden this year, along with red-fruited dessert 'Freedonia' and 'Invicta' – a green cooking type with excellent mildew resistance (well, I do like gooseberry fools.).

They're all going along the shadier north-facing fence of our plot, a position they'll tolerate better than other fruits. We're training them as cordons – essentially a single upright stem off which short fruiting spurs develop. It saves space so is ideal for gardeners on small plots, and makes picking much safer on these prickly plants. I don't want to push my luck though – having just got him to like them it would be terrible to put him off again with a thorny bush to harvest!

Thieving mice stole my beans!

I'VE had a disaster with one of my early sowings. You might remember that I started some broad beans a couple of weeks ago outdoors in the soil. To be on the safe side I also sowed some in the greenhouse in large modular trays – but the pesky mice have found them!

Furry and cute these little rodents might be, but they also have a voracious

appetite for large seeds such as peas and beans, so I also need to protect my early pea sowings.

You can set nasty traps that kill, but I prefer the humane ones so have laid half a dozen around the greenhouse. If I catch any, I'll let them go in the field next door where hopefully they'll cause less mischief!



Mice love broad bean seeds (inset)



Wikimedia

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Your Gardening Week

with AG's gardening expert Ruth Hayes



A mulch of well-rotted manure feeds your trees and deters weeds

All Time Inc

Fruit tree update

Ruth gives her fruit trees some TLC before they start growing

It may still feel cold and uninviting in the garden, but early spring is in evidence and it won't be long before fruit trees start back into life.

Prepare them for the growing season ahead by getting rid of encroaching grass and weeds around the root area. Weeds compete for both nutrients and moisture.

Then topdress the same area with well-rotted organic compost or manure. This will provide slow-release goodness, trap moisture and suppress weeds.

Also check tree ties and stakes. Loosen any that are too tight, replace rotten stakes and ties, and replace snapped and warped wires and supports on trained fruit trees.



Broad beans can be sown in raised beds as well as in the ground

Sow broad beans

Get beans in now for an early crop

■ Broad beans are a delicious early season crop, and are easy to grow.

■ If you live in a warm, sheltered part of the UK, sow seeds now in open soil. In colder areas, start them off under a cloche or fleece.

■ Sow broad beans 2-3in (5-7.5cm) deep, 6-9in (15-23cm) apart. In open beds, single rows of beans should be 18in (45cm) apart. Double rows should be 9in (23cm) apart, with 2ft (60cm) between each double row. In a raised bed, sow rows 9in (23cm) apart.

■ When seeds germinate, keep the growing area clear of weeds, and stake any plants that require support.

Step by step

Prick out veg plant seedlings



Once all the seedlings have been repotted, move them to a heated greenhouse or a warm light room, with a constant temperature of 16-18°C (60-64°F).



1 The seeds I sowed earlier this year have germinated and are ready for pricking out. The same technique applies to other seedlings, such as toms and aubergines.



3 Very carefully lift a seedling rootball from the seedtray using a thin stick, dibber or plant label. Hold the seedling by a leaf, not the plant's delicate stem.



2 Fill the required number of 3in (7cm) pots with good quality multipurpose or John Innes No 1 compost, and water them well using a can with a fine rose.



4 Make a deep hole in the dampened compost in each pot, and gently lower the seedling's rootball into it. Firm around compost gently around the roots.

Your Gardening Week

with Bob Flowerdew, AG's organic gardening expert



Bob has successfully grown the dragon fruit from seed, but so far has never got it to fruit!

Grow something unusual

Bob urges us to step outside our comfort zones and have a go at growing something unusual

I EXPECT there are many reading this that have tried growing a lemon pip or avocado stone at some point. It's one of those things you just do. But it's easy to get disheartened and give up when you realise how long it takes for a lemon to fruit, and that there's a slim chance of an avocado ever doing so; you think perhaps it was a waste of effort to try.

But there are plenty of other unusual plants out there to try. And right now (as we're at the very beginning of the season) is a good time to start. It could be a plant that has fantastic flowers or foliage, tasty crops or some architectural effect.

You don't have to make your choice from

the garden centre shelf. A surprising number of different plants can be bought by mail order, as there are many specialist nurseries. And a great number of plants can be discovered by growing from seed, as there are specialist seed companies offering all sorts of seeds for the curious.

“Now is a good time to start something unusual from seed”

But back to those fruit seeds. If you are economical like me, why not sow seeds from the different fruits and seedpods you get at the supermarket? True, many will be tropical and can't go outside, but they will still make interesting houseplants.

I have succeeded in growing many including the dragon fruit – it's not difficult to get the tiny black seeds going, but I admit I've never managed to get a crop from the stunning flowers of this epiphytic cactus. I have managed however, to get other exotics to fruit, such as: ortanique (similar to a tangerine), coffee, passionfruit, guava, cherry guava, pitanga cherry, Natal plum, tamarillo, custard apple and kiwi. ■

Bob's top tips for the week



1 Get any overdue pruning of deciduous plants done NOW, before bud burst.



2 Hoe off any early weed seedlings. Weeding little and often pays off.



3 If dry and not frosty cut grass; keep blades high to avoid damaging turf.

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A good garden performer, at trials last summer they were easily one of the most prolific bloomers, and the plants showed themselves to have the ideal habit for the home garden with sturdy bushy plants bearing multiple flower stems which in turn bear masses of neat, well-defined and strongly coloured flowers.

Ideal for dotting a few plants into the border where they will easily provide 3 months of colour, this series is also popular for commercial cut flower production. Easy to grow, well-rooted young plants will be delivered in mid-May. Pot these plants on into 9cm pots before planting out at the end of June.

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Your Gardening Week

with AG's gardening wildlife expert Graham Clarke

What's On!

February 27
– March 5

■ **26–27 Feb:** RHS London Botanical Art Show, RHS Lindley Hall, 80 Vincent Square, London SW1P 2PE;
rhs.org.uk/shows-events

■ **27 Feb:** Potato Day, Buckingham Nurseries and Garden Centre, Tingewick Road, Buckingham, MK18 4AE; 01280 822133;
buckinghamgardencentre.co.uk

■ **27 Feb:** A beginner's Guide to Growing Veg, RHS Garden Harlow Carr, Crag Lane, Harrogate, Yorks HG3 1QB; 0203 1765 830;
rhs.org.uk/gardens/harlow-carr

■ **27 Feb:** Greenhouse for Beginners, RHS Garden Wisley, Wisley Lane, Woking, Surrey GU23 6QB;
0203 1765 830;
rhs.org.uk/gardens/wisely



Greenhouse for Beginners, Wisley

■ **27 Feb:** Making the Most of Winter Beauty (talk and demo), RHS Garden Wisley, Wisley Lane, Woking, Surrey GU23 6QB; 0203 1765 830;
rhs.org.uk/gardens/wisely

■ **27 Feb:** Help! I've got a New Garden! RHS Garden Rosemoor, Great Torrington, Devon EX38 8PH;
01805 626800;
rhs.org.uk/gardens/rosemoor

■ **27–28 Feb:** See the Snowdrops, Colesbourne Gardens, Colesbourne Park, Nr Cheltenham, Glos GL53 9NP;
01242 870264/01242 870567;
colesbournegardens.org.uk

■ **28 Feb:** 8th National Springtime Scionwood Swap Day, Buckingham Nurseries and Garden Centre, Tingewick Road, Buckingham, MK18 4AE; 01280 822133;
buckinghamgardencentre.co.uk

■ Please check that the event is still going ahead before leaving home. If you have an event that you would like us to consider please email details to: amateurgardening@timeinc.uk



Magpies lay their bluish-green eggs (inset) from late March through to April

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Steal a look at magpies

Watch out for the antics of nest-building magpies, who aren't as bad as their reputation suggests says **Graham Clarke**

YOU can see magpies all over the UK, apart from north and north-west Scotland and associated islands. According to the RSPB, which carries out regular bird counts, there are more than 600,000 breeding pairs across the country.

However, the reputation of this bird goes before it. While it does have a kind of exotic charm, the image most people have is that of a squawking bully, a sneaky thief and, most heinous of all, a killer of babies.

Like other members of the crow family, a magpie will take eggs and nestlings. But while other birds have always formed a part of the magpie's diet, it has never been proven that this has played a significant role in the fall in numbers of bird populations, such as songbirds. Safe to say that for this we can lay the blame squarely on loss of habitat and food, through intensive farming practices.

Magpies don't just eat baby birds, of course. Their main diet for most of the year includes many well-known garden pests, such as flies, caterpillars and leatherjackets, as well as spiders and plenty of worms.

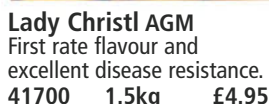
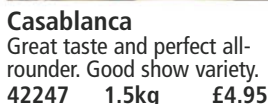
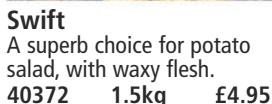
By this point in the season magpies will

have already chosen their own nesting sites, and made a start on nest building. But they tend not to lay their bluish-green eggs until late March or April, with hatching about seven weeks later.

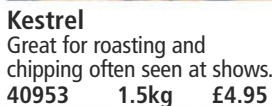
When young, the birds do look a bit scruffy and have short tails. But if you were able to study a magpie at close quarters, you'd be amazed at its plumage. As well as its very long tail, and that instantly recognisable black-and-white colouring, it has wonderful iridescent purple body feathers and a green tail. These colours are produced not by pigment, but by light refraction, caused by the microscopic structure of the feather itself.

Magpies have a characteristic flight pattern, in which they intermittently glide, then rapidly flap their wings. They also have a habit of stealing small but bright objects, and storing them in their nests. So it's not surprising that some people dislike the birds so much they'd happily cull them given half a chance. However, unless you're a licensed landowner, you'd have to prove in a court of law that you acted lawfully in killing the bird – a difficult task given the lack of evidence that magpies significantly affect garden bird numbers.

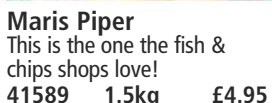
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This week's Free Seeds



How to sow with Anne Swithinbank



Perfect filler: Cosmos 'Candy Stripe' will soon turn bare patches into a riot of colour



How to grow your free Cosmos 'Candy Stripe'

KNOWN as Mexican aster or simply 'cosmos', *C. bipinnatus* is a large and unpretentious half-hardy annual from Mexico. The seeds are easy to handle, plants are straightforward to grow and they are great for filling large bare patches in the garden.

Anyone struggling to flesh out a new plot on a tight budget will find them just the job.

A mass of cosmos grow really well together because their finely divided, ferny foliage interlinks so that

none of the plants topple over.

The variety 'Candy Stripe' has a dark-crimson picotee edge to the white petals of its daisy-like flowers and each plant can reach a height of 36in (90cm) and width of 18in (46cm).

Some blooms are flecked with colour and a few are pure crimson. They are great for cutting (try searing stem ends in a pot of just-boiled water for 30 seconds) and pollinating insects are attracted to them.



Cosmos prefer a sheltered sunny spot in my garden

In the garden

In the wild, cosmos inhabit meadows and scrubland. In our gardens, they prefer a sunny, sheltered spot where the wind won't bash plants around, though partial shade for a few hours a day is tolerated.

They are equally at home in modern schemes, cottage gardens or on the veg plot but I love to see a whole bed of them.

The best partners are plants with contrasting foliage and for 'Candy Stripe' I have the large, purplish red leaves of smoke bush *Cotinus* 'Grace' in mind.

In a more exotic border, try growing your cosmos alongside the metallic, silvery leaves of slightly tender honeywort, (*Melianthus major*) or shrubby *Elaeagnus angustifolia* 'Quicksilver'.

In containers, set cosmos against purple-leaved cordyline or phormium.

Double free seeds next week!
Don't miss *Cleome* 'Colour Fountain' and *Antirrhinum* 'Rust Resistant' – both FREE with AG's 5 March issue



Step by step

How to sow your Cosmos 'Candy Stripe'

AG's propagation expert Anne Swithinbank shows how to get your *Cosmos* 'Candy Stripe' off to the best start in three simple steps.



1 For early flowers, sow now but make a main sowing in April. Fill a wide, shallow pot with seed compost and tamp the surface gently. Water using a fine 'rose' on the can and let it soak in.



2 Space the seeds out over the surface of the compost, thinly and evenly. Then scatter compost over to cover the seeds by their own size. Press very lightly to firm in.



3 Place in warmth to germinate at 15–18°C (60–65°F). Transplant seedlings singly to 3.5in (9cm) pots. You can sink any leggy seedlings almost up to their leaves at this stage.

Problem solver



Ladybirds will eat aphids

■ Slugs and snails are attracted to the soft foliage of young plants, so check on them after dark and collect, trap or put down ferric phosphate slug pellets.

■ Aphids can appear on stems and leaves but look to see whether natural predators (birds, ladybirds and their larvae, hoverfly and lacewing larvae, velvet mites, flower bugs, parasitic wasps) move in before taking action.

■ If I have to spray I'll use a soft soap solution or SB Plant Spray. Spray after the bees have gone to bed.

Outdoor sowings

■ *Cosmos* are so accommodating. They'll germinate from direct sowings made towards the end of April, though you'll have to wait longer for flowers.

■ Rake the surface to a fine 'tilth', getting rid of lumps and stones, then take out drills in straight lines or curves 12in (30cm) apart.

■ Soak the base of the drills if the soil is dry, then sow thinly and evenly 6in (15cm) apart and thin down to one per 12in (30cm), or set two to three seeds per station 12in (30cm) apart and thin to one after germination.



For outdoor sowings, rake the soil surface to a fine tilth

Aftercare tips

■ Stand seedlings on greenhouse staging as soon as they germinate, as cooler temperatures and good light will bring sturdy growth. Should frost be forecast, pop them back in a warm propagator.

■ Harden young plants off by standing them outside to accustom themselves to the weather before planting. Set plants out informally, 1ft (30cm) apart in their groups and plant using a trowel. Water in well. Don't overfeed or leaves prosper at the cost of flowers. Solo mature plants may need a few twiggy sticks as support.

■ *Cosmos* seed themselves into the border. If you don't disturb the soil too much, they should germinate in situ next year. All you have to do is thin them out for another round of free plants.



Stand seedlings on greenhouse staging to encourage sturdy growth

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Ask Christine!

Voted AG's celebrity gardener of the year

Lilacs should be moved in November, after leaf fall



Shutterstock

When is the best time to move a lilac?

Q I would be grateful if you would let me know when is the best time to move a lilac. It is about 4-5ft (1.2-1.5m) tall, and was planted around three or four years ago.
Geraldine Sweeney (via email)

A The best time to move a three-year old and 4-5ft (1.2-1.5m) lilac is from November, when leaves fall, to late winter when buds enlarge and begin to open.

Start by digging a trench around the tree 2ft (60cm) from the trunk, and undercut roots so that there are plenty left to help the bush recover afterwards.

Then, with an assistant, secure a pole horizontally to the trunk so that the lilac can be lifted and set into a generous planting hole, so that it is at the same depth it was before.

Ideally, wrap several layers of hessian around the trunk before lifting the tree to avoid damaging the bark.

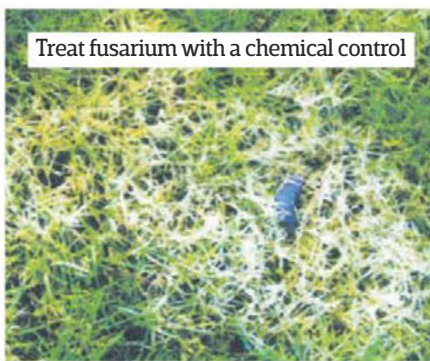
How can I get rid of snow mould?

Q After we had some snow last winter, it looked as though patches of our lawn were dying. I fed them, which seemed to help, but after more snow last month, the problem returned. What is it and can anything be done?
Trevor Cook, Walsall

A Your lawn has been infected with snow mould, also known as fusarium mould. It will be less of a problem in summer.

As well as feeding, re-seeding and aerating the grass, you can kill the fungus with Bayer Garden Lawn Disease Control. This is a remedy for fusarium and red thread (a common fungal lawn

Treat fusarium with a chemical control



T. Cook

complaint) that can be applied all year.

Use it now, then feed your lawn with a balanced fertiliser in March, and repeat the treatment monthly until August.



Timeinc

Cannas need feeding to fuel flowers and leaves

Cannas need a balanced feed

Q What is the best rich compost to use for re-potting my cannas? I don't want to use something that isn't helpful for the whole plant.
John Dixon (via email)

A Vitax Q4 is an inorganic (man-made) fertiliser that is powdered or granular. It has an N:P:K (nitrogen:phosphorus:potassium) ratio of 5.3:7.5:10, which means that although it is general-purpose, it has more potassium so is useful for promoting flowering and fruiting.

Blood, fish and bone is organic (made from natural materials) and has an NPK rating of 5:5:6, so it is balanced and good for growth, flowering and also fruiting.

Chicken pellet manures come in arrange of ratios for different uses. The ratio should be listed on the packaging, so I would opt for a balanced product that will give your cannas good foliage as well as flowers.

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Indoor plant care: Remove the winter's dust and debris from indoor plants by gently polishing their leaves with a damp cloth.



Timeline



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Amaryllis will flower year after year

Getting the best from your amaryllis

Q My two amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*) have had two stems each with many flowers, but neither has produced any leaves. Have they stored enough energy to flower again, or should I throw them away?
Marion May (via email)

A They will have used up energy flowering without leaves, but this is not unusual and the leaves will appear, and replenish the bulbs for next year.

Once you have removed the flower stems, top-dress the pots with fresh compost, and keep watering lightly.

Pot amaryllis in the autumn, and keep the compost moist during flowering and growth. Give a liquid feed while the leaves are growing. Once the leaves have started to yellow in the summer, let them dry off, and keep them somewhere cool.

You can force dormancy by withholding water, or continue to water and accept that the flowering season may go astray! If the bulbs do go dormant, return them to growth in autumn by watering.

Hippeastrums often flower better when pot-bound, so don't re-pot every year, but topdress with new compost in the autumn.

How to replace a dead hedge plant

Q The central section of my escallonia hedge has now lost all its leaves. What do you think is the problem?

Simon Travers, Stoke on Trent



Timeline

Photinia makes an attractive hedging plant

A Your hedge may be infected by honey fungus. Expose a largish root, and peel back the bark. If there is white mould and a mushroom smell, this disease is the culprit.

There are no controls, so remove and throw away or burn, the diseased plant to 4ft (1.2m) either side of the damaged area. Dig in fresh soil, and replant the hedge with laurel, photinia, hawthorn or holly, which are usually resistant to this fungus.

If there is no white mould, the cause could be root death, a fungus that kills roots, which develop a dead, black core.



P Pearce

Sweet pea seedlings grow 'leggy' if they are too warm

Leggy sweetpeas

Q My sweet pea seedlings, growing indoors, have got all long and 'leggy'. How can I control their growth?

P Pearce (via email)

A Your sweet peas have been raised in too warm a position. Move them to a cooler spot in good light. Within a week or so, much stronger stems will appear.

Harden-off plants by positioning them outdoors in a sheltered spot by day, bringing them in at night. Or leave them outdoors, and cover them with cloches.

In April, transplant them 6in (15cm) apart in two rows 18in (45cm) distant. Support plants with netting or pea sticks.



Timeline

Jerusalem artichokes like fertile, free-draining soil

Where can I find more artichokes?

Q I have grown Jerusalem artichokes for years, but this year's crop was disastrous, and I'm having difficulty sourcing more seeds. Where can I get some more?

Mary Barton, Truro

A The smooth-skinned and slightly more knobby Jerusalem artichokes are available from S E Marshall and Co, Alconbury Hill, Huntingdon, Cambs PE28 4HY, © 01480 443390, and from marshalls-seeds.co.uk

To get the best results, plant 'seed' tubers in fertile, free-draining soil. Ideally, set them in a north-south line along the edge of your plot, to avoid the plant's tallish foliage overshadowing smaller crops.

Ask Christine!



Follow Christine's Masterclass on growing potatoes



Chat to local gardeners to see what potato varieties perform well in your area

All Time Inc.

I need advice on growing potatoes for the first time. What's the risk of blight?

Q I want to grow potatoes for the first time, but I'm confused about planting times and varieties. Please could you explain the difference between 'earlies', 'second earlies' and 'maincrop' and suggest reliable varieties. Should I worry about the blight disease everyone talks about?

James Turner, Tredegar, South Wales

A Blight occurs during damp growing seasons and is difficult to control using chemicals.

However, recent development of blight-resistant varieties are helping gardeners to cope with this serious disease.

Look out for the Sarpo varieties, such as 'Sarpo Kifli', 'Sarpo Axona', 'Sarpo Mira' and 'Sarpo Blue Danube' which are all claimed to have good blight-resistance.

Potatoes should be planted from early to late spring. Being frost tender, keep a close watch on the weather forecast and protect the young foliage from frost.

In the warmest areas you can plant up to

four weeks earlier; further north and east, wait and plant at later times.

If slugs are a problem, harvest all maincrop potatoes as early as possible, by the end of August.

Selection of reliable varieties is dependant on what you want: are you keen to use the spuds for chips, boiling, roasting or salads?

Success depends on soil condition. Add plenty of well-rotted organic matter, water in drought conditions, grow on rich, fertile soil on an open site, and avoid frost pockets for the best results. The soil pH should be between 5 and 6.

It's advisable to chat to local gardeners about variety selection, as these are the people who have been growing spuds in their gardens or allotments for many years. They'll have a good knowledge of which varieties grow well in your area.

The term earlies, second earlies and maincrop refer to the time the crop takes to grow and the season of lifting (see right).

Spuds made simple



■ **Earlies** are the first new potatoes of the season. They mature in 100-110 days, have thin skins but don't store well. Plant from mid-March to late-May. Tubers should be spaced 12in (30cm) apart, in rows that are 20-24in (50-60cm) apart. Harvest from late-May into July. The varieties 'Swift', 'Red Duke of York' (above) 'Maris Bard', 'Rocket', 'Arran Pilot', 'Foremost', 'Accent' and 'Mozart' are good.



■ **Second earlies** mature in about 110-120 days and generally grow larger than earlies. Most store well. Plant from mid-March to the end of April. Tubers should be spaced 14in (35cm) apart, in rows 30in (75cm) apart. Harvest from mid-July to the end of September or early October. Second early varieties include 'Maris Peer', 'Hunter', 'Kestrel', 'Lady Balfour' and 'Estima' (pictured, above).



■ **Maincrop** spuds mature in 125-140 days and can store through winter. They produce big yields and large potatoes with thicker skins. Harvest in autumn. Plant as second earlies, and at the same spacing. Harvest from mid-July to late September or early October. Maincrops include 'King Edward', 'Cara' (above), 'Desiree', 'Maris Piper', 'Harmony', 'Markies', 'Rudolph' and 'Sarpo Mira'.

One of the most exciting plants to watch as the tight buds slowly unfurl into stately spires

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Limited space? Grow one Second Early variety. Harvest half the crop as a salad potato, leave the rest for four weeks or more to mature as a main crop



Potato fan: Kris grows maincrops in the ground and earlies in containers for a plentiful supply of spuds from May to October

Potatoes:

Plots vs pots

Want the best from your harvest? Gardening expert **Kris Collins** offers top tips for both ground and container crops

POTATOES are an easy crop to grow. Start with high-yielding modern varieties with strong pest and blight resistance and you'll have very few problems. Best results are had on soils dug in autumn and improved with manure or compost, but potatoes grow well in a range of soils types and conditions.

Not everyone has room for large crops. Even by closing the recommended spacing slightly, I've only space for 18 main crop tubers this season. My earlies will be grown in containers, but that's not a negative – it is after all how exhibition growers produce pristine, show-bench specimens!

Potatoes fall into three main cropping groups (see guide below). Select a mix of varieties from these groups for extended harvests and different uses in the kitchen. Then simply choose between growing in the ground, in containers, or a bit of both.

Growing in the ground

Traditional advice is to mark a row, dig a long planting drill, apply feed, set tubers in the soil and back-fill. On well-dug, workable soils I find it easier and quicker to get on hands and knees with a trowel to plant my tubers individually like spring flowers bulbs – dropping the tubers 6in (15cm) deep and closing the soil over them. This method is fine in small gardens, but on heavy soils or big areas, I'm on my feet, hoeing long, 6in-deep drills, as

allotment growers would.

Either way, rows should be covered with a 4in (10cm) ridge of soil. I mix in 50g of Chempak Organic Potato Fertiliser over each tuber while doing this. If rain doesn't bed things in within a couple of days I water the rows. As soon as 4in (10cm) of foliage growth is on show the rows are earthen up – drawing soil up around the stems to encourage longer tuber-producing stems. I'll do this sooner if frosts are forecast in

“Well-dug soils make earthing up much easier to do”

order to protect the tender foliage growth.

This is where the hard work of autumn/winter soil prep pays off. Well cultivated soils are looser and easier to draw up around the plants. Hoeing between rows once a week through the season not only keeps the area weed-free, it also helps keep soils loose for easier earthing up.

Earthing up should be done once or twice more, at two to three week intervals.

Lighten the load

If repeated earthing up sounds like too much work, there's a low maintenance option if you are prepared to put in a little more work at planting time. Growing potatoes under black polythene blocks out sunlight so weeds can't grow, but tubers can thrive. The extra warmth boosts early growth and crops can grow on for longer at the end of the season, protected from the first autumn frosts.

Slugs can be a problem beneath the polythene, but the method does produce good yields for minimum effort. When growth pushes against the polythene, slit the cover with a sharp knife so shoots can grow up into the light. Simply pull back the polythene at harvest time to reveal the crop. You'll rarely need to water the crop. The cover should retain enough moisture to support the plants, but in long dry spells watch out for wilting foliage. ►

Best varieties for ground crops



'Charlotte' (Second Early). A very popular salad variety for quick boiling and eating hot or cold. This gourmet variety fetches a premium price in the supermarket. Grow your own for less.



Best roastie!

'Carolus' (Early Maincrop). Smooth skinned yellow tubers. Its floury texture makes it great for roasting, baking and chipping. I really like the flavour and texture of this one. The best I've grown.



Best for mash

'Manitou' (Maincrop). I've used the large red-skinned potatoes for roasting and baking as well as mashing. Produced a high number of extra-large tubers on my plot. Good eelworm resistance in the soil.



'Sarpomira' (Maincrop). This is the variety for anyone who's late main crops have been hit by blight in recent years. Cut the foliage down in early September and leave for 3 weeks before harvest.

Planting guide

- **First Earlies** and **Second Earlies** are 'new' potatoes. They are ideal for growing in bags or containers. Harvest 10-16 weeks after planting.
- **Maincrop** potatoes are larger and are ideal for roasting and baking. They are best grown in the ground, but they can be grown in containers. Harvest 20 weeks from planting.
- All types of potatoes can be planted through to late May, but the earlier the better to avoid late blight.
- Set rows 2ft (60cm) apart for Earlies and 3ft (90cm) for Maincrops.

Grow potatoes in bags

You'll be surprised at the yields you'll get from bags...

Step by step

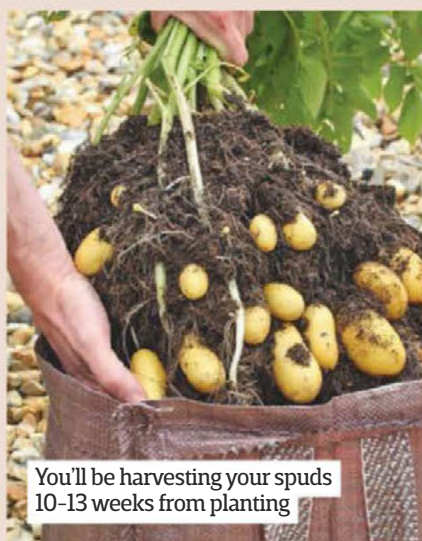
How to plant



Add 6in (15cm) of compost to base of a bag, put in five tubers, cover



Earth up the foliage several times as it grows until bag is full of compost



You'll be harvesting your spuds 10-13 weeks from planting

CONTAINER growing is the perfect option for those without ground to plant potatoes, but it's not the only reason to grow this way. You can avoid the frosts and grow extra-early or -late container crops undercover. It's also a good way of resting your soil for a season or two if potato-related pests and diseases have built up in the ground.

I've had success with 40-litre woven potato growing bags in the past. Five tubers are placed over a few inches of compost at the bottom of the bag and covered with 6in (15cm) of compost. Foliage is earthed up with compost several times as it grows, until the bag is full. The method is popular, but many are put off by the small crops.

Last year I tried a method borrowed from exhibition growers, and furthered during technical trials at the Thompson & Morgan

“Show exhibitors grow potatoes in bags for top results”

HQ in Suffolk. It's no big secret that show bench growers produce some of their 'prettiest' unblemished tubers by setting one tuber in a 14-litre black polythene bag filled with compost. Experimenting with even smaller bags the technical trial showed a vast improvement in yield with one potato plunged into a 8-litre bag, compared to five tubers in a 40-litre bag – despite the same compost to tuber ratio. Potato 'Jazzy', showed a 186% yield increase, a few of the Jazzy bags had over 80 tubers on harvest! I've also seen 17.5lb of Maris Peer harvested from just three 8-litre bags.

The black polythene absorbs the sun's



Potato flowers not only look pretty they indicate that it's time to harvest the tubers of Early potatoes

warmth, keeping the small amount of compost consistently warmer than the 40 litres in the larger bags. This leads to earlier, faster growth and bigger yields, so even without a garden – you really only need a back step or deep window ledge – you can grow a worthy crop in a very small space. What's more, the potatoes are set 5-6in (12.5-15cm) deep in a filled bag – no need for earthing up – simple and space saving!

Maxing yields

The key to good cropping in small containers is quality multipurpose compost, even watering, regular feeding, and a sheltered, sunny growing location.

Mix 50g of potato fertiliser into each bag when setting the tubers. Apply an additional 25g every week or so. Water regularly – do not allow the compost to dry much more than an inch (2.5cm) below the surface before watering again.

I'm amazed at the results with first and second earlies in 8-litre growing bags, so I'm testing it with main crops this season. I can't imagine there being space for a decent haul so I'll be comparing it with the traditional 14-litre exhibitors growing bag to test the difference. I'd urge you to give both bags a go yourself – report back at the end of the season to show off your results. ■

Suppliers of seed potatoes and bags

- Wilko. High street stores nationwide. wilko.com
- Thompson & Morgan 0844 573 1818, thompson-morgan.com
- Mr Fothergill's 0333 777 3936, mr-fothergills.co.uk

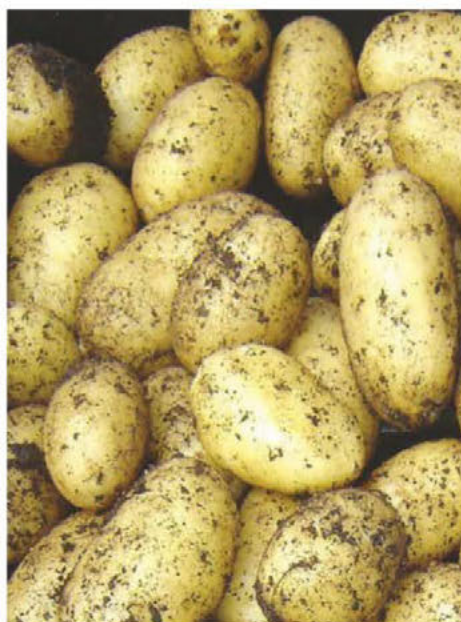
Best varieties for containers



*Earliest
crop*

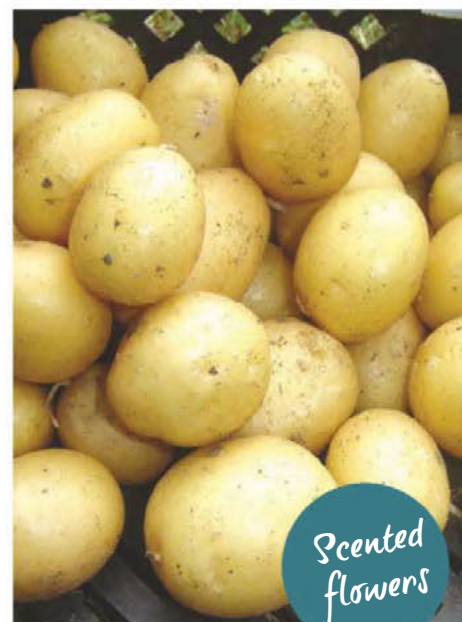
'Abbot'

First Early. One of the earliest to crop (10 weeks) A new rival to 'Rocket', bringing full flavour to your first crop of the season.



'Jazzy'

Second Early. A really heavy cropper of small, full flavoured salad potatoes. Grow up to 80 potatoes from a single tuber.



*Scented
flowers*

'Maris Peer'

Second Early. Over 50 years old but still holding its own in the flavour stakes. Produces slightly scented purple flowers.



'Pink Fir Apple'

Early Maincrop. An attractive variety with slender knobbly tubers. Cook whole – each tuber will make a single tasty chip.



*Heritage
variety*

'Sharpe's Express'

First Early. The best I've grown in 40-litre growing bags. A high dry matter content makes it good for chips and baked spuds.



'Swift'

First Early. As the name suggests, a fast cropper – lift within seven weeks of sowing! Compact short, bushy foliage.

*Try
something
new*

3 potato alternatives for sunny spots

Sweet potatoes

No earthing up needed. Grow in large containers or under black weed control fabric in the soil – the extra warmth will boost yields.



Andean Yacon Root

Firm water-chestnut texture and high liquid content. Use fresh, store, or juice to extract a sweet syrup for use as sugar alternative.



New Zealand Yam

Red-skinned tubers have a lemony flavour that turns nuttier when cooked. Use the cream flesh raw in salads or boil, bake or fry.



Gardening News

The latest stories from around the UK

Got a story? call 01202 440848
or email marc.rosenberg@timeinc.com



Host: The Prince of Wales

Highgrove Enterprises / Timeinc

Organisers promise exclusive tours of the Highgrove grounds during the festival

Royal gardens to host new 'green' gardening festival

Stars of TV and radio set to converge on Highgrove gardens

A NEW six-day garden festival will take root in the royal grounds of Britain's most famous private organic gardens.

Top TV gardeners and leading nurseries are all promised for the first Highgrove: The Garden Celebrated, to be held on 11-16 April.

Highgrove, in Gloucestershire, is the private residence of organic champion the Prince of Wales, and the Duchess of Cornwall.

Speakers include ITV Love Your Garden presenter Alan Titchmarsh, BBC Gardeners' World co-presenters Carol Klein and Rachel de

Thame, *The Beechgrove Garden* star Chris Beardshaw and *Gardeners' Question Time* panellist Bob Flowerdew, the AG columnist.

Herb expert Jekka McVicar and TV landscaper

"An insight into the sustainable approach behind the gardens"



Star of the show: Alan Titchmarsh

Timeinc

David Domoney will share their expertise, too.

Organisers say the festival will "bear testimony to the Prince of Wales' ethos on organic and sustainable gardening with a number of highly applauded guest speakers, presenting on everything from wildlife to organic food-growing and plant care."

However, organisers told AG that despite the event's green ethos, they could not guarantee that plants for sale by exhibitors would be grown without the use of chemicals or peat.

Sustainable gardens

Highgrove Enterprises chief executive Chris Prescott promised "exclusive talks and guided tours throughout the week".

Chris said: "The festival will capture the essence of Highgrove and will be a unique insight into the ethos and sustainable approach behind the gardens, as well as a reflection of the horticultural interests and enthusiasms of HRH The Prince of Wales."

Ticket prices vary from £17.50 to £95, as options are available for exclusive talks and garden tours, as well as afternoon tea, lunch and supper packages. Visit highgroveshop.com/festival for details or to book tickets.



Shutterstock

Garden centres could soon be allowed to open for longer on Sundays

Shop till you drop on Sundays?

FOR gardeners who love to shop, it could be the answer to your prayers.

Garden industry chiefs are confident that laws which only allow big garden centres to open for six consecutive hours on Sundays, will soon be consigned to history.

An amendment is expected to be made to the Enterprise Bill, which would hand power to local authorities to determine retailers' Sunday opening hours.

Short Sunday trading hours have been an irritation to garden centre managers since rules were introduced over 20 years ago.

Affected garden centres (those over 3,000 square metres) say they can't compete fairly with internet retailers.

Religious groups have consistently opposed Sunday trading law reform.

Needs of locals

Now, despite setbacks, reforms would give local authorities the power to set Sunday trading rules that "reflect the needs of local people and allow shops to open for longer".

According to the Horticultural Trades Association (HTA), MPs intend to "strengthen and further protect workers' rights to opt out of Sunday working".

HTA chief executive Carol Paris said: "It is encouraging that progress is being made towards updating this law, which is no longer fit for purpose."



Gardeners switch to plugs

Thompson & Morgan says sales of its garden-ready plug plants "nearly tripled" last season. It supplied more than four million plugs to UK gardeners during 2015.

Gardeners' Question Time this week

On this week's programme...

Bob Flowerdew, James Wong and Bunny Guinness join Eric Robson at the Royal Academy in London. BBC Radio 4 at 3pm on Friday 26 April (repeated at 2pm on Sunday 28 April).

Chelsea rose to raise plight of slaves

AS names for new roses go, it may not appeal to shoppers who are looking for something a little romantic.

'The Modern Slavery Rose' will be unveiled at the Chelsea Flower Show (24-28 May).

Set to receive its first public airing in Chelsea's Modern Slavery Garden, designed by Juliet Sargeant, it's being introduced by Dickson Nurseries of County Down, in Northern Ireland.

'The Modern Slavery Rose' and garden "will celebrate Parliament passing the Modern Slavery Act, which became law in March 2015".

The rose aims to highlight a report by the American government, which claims that 27million people are still in slavery around the world.

A spokeswoman for the garden and rose launch said:



Dickson Roses

Orange blooms with a message: 'The Modern Slavery Rose'

"The garden looks forward to a day when there are no slaves."

The rose is a floribunda that flowers from June until late-October, bearing blooms that are described as "reddish-orange with a hint of yellow".

It will be available to order from March (with plants due to be despatched from November onwards). Plants cost £10 plus p&p. Go to dickson-roses.co.uk or call 028 9181 2206 for further details.

A BLOOMIN' GOOD WEEK



Getting married

The Royal National Rose Society has obtained a licence to carry out weddings at its five-acre rose garden at St. Albans, Hertfordshire.



Community decision-making

Locals in Horncastle, Lincolnshire, are voting for a new name for Crowders Garden Centre, following its acquisition by Wyevale.

Is it spring or summer at Eden?



Bath Eden Project

Season confusion: Eden

GARDENERS at Cornwall's Eden Project were shocked when Mediterranean plants burst into bloom outdoors – at the start of February.

The Canary Island foxglove (*Isoplexis canariensis*) which usually flowers in late-spring or early-summer, is already in bloom at Eden's outdoor gardens.

It is joined by hooded yellow



flowers of Jerusalem sage (*Phlomis fruticosa*, pictured)

and blooms of Purple-

Flowered Rock Rose

(*Cistus x purpureus*), both of which would normally flower during summer.

Eden horticulturist

Julie Kendall said:

"This is the most unusual early-flowering activity we've seen in the 15 years since the Eden Project opened."



Compost prices

The worst peat harvest since 2012 could lead to an increase in the price of compost, according to growing media specialists.



Shopping bills

The cost of winter veg at shops could rise due to crops lost following the wet December, reports trade mag *The Grocer*.

Cardiff to celebrate life of Roald Dahl

FANS of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The BFG*, *The Giant Peach* should head to Cardiff on 15-17 April for some childhood nostalgia.

The RHS Flower Show Cardiff will celebrate 'the wonderful world of Roald Dahl' – marking 100 years since the famous author was born in Llandaff,

Cardiff. Highlights will include a garden inspired by *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, created by designer Tony Smith. It will feature a bubbling chocolate lake.

Last year, a record 25,800 visitors crammed into Bute Park for the Cardiff show.

Go to rhs.org.uk/Cardiff for details and tickets.



Timelapse

Popular: Cardiff show

A BLOOMIN' BAD WEEK

Your Gardening Week

with Martyn Cox in his city garden



Make the most of every available space in a small garden, including the window ledge

All images Time Inc. unless stated

Step by step

Planting up your windowbox



1 Spread some multi-purpose compost in the base of your window box. If the container has a single hole in the base then add a layer of crocks to the bottom to improve drainage.



2 Remove plants from pots and place into the windowbox - it's easier to start in the centre and work outwards. Add more compost to the base if you need to elevate smaller specimens.



3 Once happy with the arrangement, fill the gaps with compost and firm each plant in place. Water well, but avoid washing out compost, then place on your chosen window ledge.

Grow windowbox colour

Give your windows a brighter outlook says **Martyn**

MOST garden centres, nurseries and DIY stores stock a range of winter interest shrubs, flowering perennials, bulbs and seasonal bedding plants. These can be combined in window boxes for an instant splash of colour that will last through spring. Expect to find wallflowers, polyanthus, primroses, myosotis and bellis, along with a selection of pansies and violas in many vivid shades. They can be mixed with plants prized for their foliage, such as trailing ivies, young shrubs and conifers in small pots.

Down at the garden centre I picked cyclamen, ivies, some golden leaved Mexican orange blossom in 3in (7.5cm) pots and a pint-sized *Cupressus macrocarpa* 'Goldcrest', to form the centrepiece of the grouping in my window box. I had already checked out the extensive range of window boxes on sale, plumping for a cheap and cheerful plastic model with a drip tray to keep my window ledge clean. Armed with the container, I could place plants inside to see how they would look together.

Don't rush this part. Add plants, take them away and generally move them about until you are happy with the display. I have to admit that I got a few bemused looks from other shoppers when doing this, but I'd rather put up with the odd snigger than make a costly mistake.

Back home, I planted up the window box

and put it in position outside the kitchen windowsill, where the colourful arrangement transformed my usual dreary view of the shed. It won't last forever, so once plants have gone past their best I'll eject them and replace with new occupants.

Start a regular garden diary



I USE my diary to record the names of plants I buy, addresses of nurseries and jobs I've been doing. During the year, I'll note down when I've sown seeds, when they've germinated and when plants flower.

There are lots of fancy gardening diaries on the market but, to be honest, all you really need is a simple hard backed notepad.

Dare to bare your bamboos

BAMBOOS are prized for their architectural looks, but clumps soon lose their appeal if they become congested or showy canes are hidden behind a mass of foliage. To ensure plants continue to earn their keep, it's worth giving them a quick spruce up.

My castillon bamboo (*Phyllostachys bambusoides* 'Castillonii') is a relative baby, but if you have a mature grove it's a good idea to thin them out by removing any wispy, damaged or dying canes, cutting them off at ground level to avoid leaving ugly stumps.

A great way to make the most of the colourful stems is to strip the leaves from the bottom third of plants. Avoid damage by snipping off side branches flush to the cane with secateurs.

Don't worry about the litter of dead leaves that bamboos shed as they grow. Learn to live with it – as the leaves rot down, they release a nutrient called silica into the soil, helping with the development of new canes. Now that's a good excuse to avoid tidying up!



Bamboo stems need to be seen and enjoyed. If branches don't come away by hand use secateurs

Choosing a fig tree

I MAY have a north-facing back garden, but that doesn't mean every bit is enveloped in darkness. The very back is bathed in sun for most of the day in summer, so I thought I'd make the most of my miniature sun-trap by growing a fruit tree.

To save on space I decided on something

that would be happy trained on wires against the wall. Fans, espaliers, cordons and other restricted forms are perfect as they take up very little room at ground level, but still provide plenty of good stuff to eat.

I looked at lots of different types of fruit,

eventually settling on a fan-trained fig tree. Not only because I like the sweet, sticky fruit, but for its foliage – I can't think of any other type of fruit that are quite so ornamental. The variety I've gone for is *Ficus carica* 'Dalmatie', which has the most amazing elongated, lobed leaves.

Over the next month or so I'll show you how I add support wires to a wall and my tried and trusted method for planting figs.

Three of the best figs



■ **'Panachee'** – green fruit marked with yellow stripes. Reads Nursery readsnursery.co.uk.



■ **'Brown Turkey'** – brown skinned fruit with red flesh. Chris Bowers & Sons, chrisbowers.co.uk.



■ **'Rouge de Bordeaux'** – purple fruit with red flesh. Deacon's Nursery, deaconsnurseryfruits.co.uk.

Your Gardening Week

with Martyn Cox in his city garden



What a difference a spray makes to paving ...and the look of the entire garden

All Time Inc. unless stated

Put your paving under pressure

YOU'D never guess that the grey sandstone patio and paving in my garden was laid last October. Back then it looked so good that neighbours on both sides paid me complements. I can't imagine they would make similar remarks today. In a little over four months, an ugly layer of greenish algae mixed with grime has steadily built up on the surface.

Apart from looking unsightly, this filthy coating makes the slabs slippery, and dangerous to walk on in wet weather. In the past the only solution would have been to spend hours on your hands and knees

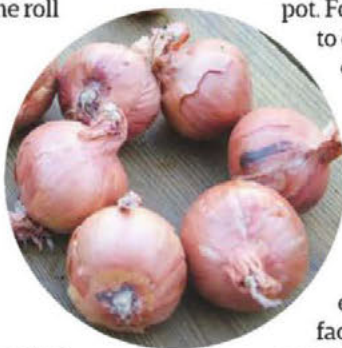
scrubbing away at the ground with a brush. What a backbreaking chore that would have been, so thank heavens for the invention of the pressure washer.

These timesaving gadgets will shift dirt in seconds by blasting it with a powerful jet of water. They are actually a lot of fun to use, honestly. It's possible to hire one for about £30 a day from a machinery hire store, but I'd really recommend getting your own if you have storage room. Pressure washers can be used for cleaning many other things, including decking, walls, garden furniture and even the car - without chemicals.

Plant up shallots in pots

MANY years ago, when I first started growing my own vegetables, I made a long list of plants that I wanted to grow. Somewhere near the top of the roll call were shallots. I've long loved their tangy flavour - and the mouthwatering descriptions of varieties in seed catalogues.

Shallots are dead easy to grow. Best started from sets, they are essentially small, immature bulbs that can be planted into pots or the ground. If you've got a sheltered garden in a milder part of the country you can get going now, otherwise it's best to wait until March.



I'm planning on planting a row or two next time I'm at the allotment, but before that I'm putting a few 'Red Sun' shallots in a large pot. For a worthwhile crop it's best

to choose a substantial container that's at least 12in (30cm) deep. Fill with soil-based compost or a well-drained multi-purpose compost, and make a series of shallow holes 6in (15cm) apart.

Drop a bulb into each, ensuring the pointy end is facing upwards, then cover with compost, firm with your fingers and water well. The nose of the bulb should just be peeking above the surface.

Each bulb should produce about 8-10 shallots, which will be ready for harvesting in the summer



Soapy water does the trick when cleaning a spade

Keep spades clean

MY garden spade sees lots of action, so I occasionally like to give it a quick clean. This will extend its life and allow it to cut through soil with ease. I start by scraping off any caked-on clods of mud, then scrub the blade in soapy water before drying. If you really want to go to town, try rubbing away rust with wire wool, then spraying with light oil.

Next week

with Tamsin Westhorpe
AG's country garden expert

Theatre invitation:

There's a new auricula theatre at Stockton Bury and Tamsin shares tips on the early care of young plants that will take to the stage.

Tunnel tidy:

With heavy rain a regular feature in Herefordshire, Tamsin prepares the polytunnel for the comings and goings of plants in spring.

Spring posies:

Bring the outdoors in. Creating a spring posy can provide you with all the colours and fragrance of the season.



Tree Lupins

A flowering barrier that is simply superb

Reach 5ft high in just 2 seasons



**Free
growing
guide**

So much
cheaper than
fencing - **Bright,
bold, fragrant** -
Hardy Evergreen

Why Tree Lupins are a good choice for your garden:

- Easy ■ Fully winter hardy: ice, snow and frost are no problem
■ Long flowering period ■ Tough ■ Beautiful blooms ■ Resilient
■ Delightful screen or informal hedge ■ In leaf all-year-round
We recommend planting 3-feet apart.

We recommend planting 3-feet apart.

Grow the biggest, brightest and boldest evergreen lupins ever! Deliciously fragrant, to form a beautiful hedge or screen, or as a focal point in any garden. Once you have planted Tree Lupins they will go on growing year-after-year without replanting - a real investment. They reach a height of approximately 5 feet, so just trim them to the height you require. They are called 'Tree Lupins' due to the plant having a 'trunk-like' stem, rather like a bush.

How do Tree Lupins differ from 'ordinary' lupins?

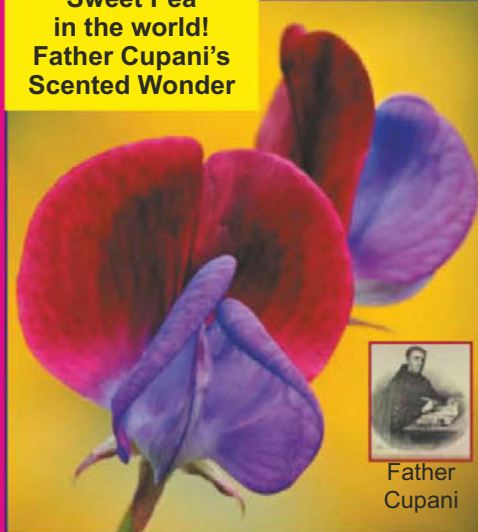
Varieties such as Russell Lupins die down to the ground each winter, sprouting again the next year. They have soft stems. The Tree Lupin develops a tough bark-like stem, rather as a shrub does; hence the name.

They remain in leaf all year and the blooms are far more numerous than the spikes of 'ordinary' garden Lupins. Supplied as a mixture of naturally-varying shades, which may include cream, white, yellow and, sometimes, blue.

5 plants for £44.50 10 for £79 20 for £140

**The most scented
Sweet Pea
in the world!
Father Cupani's
Scented Wonder**

Strongly fragrant maroon and mauve flowers, come with an RHS Award of Garden Merit.



Father
Cupani

This old-fashioned plant is a fragrant piece of history, ideal to scramble over anything you want to beautify. More classic simple blooms than the modern types and, once flowering, it can be picked every day.

First introduced in the 17th century by Sicilian monk Francis Cupani, its strong and heady scent will be a talking point in your garden. Can grow up from the smallest patch of earth or a large pot - no vast space needed.

Spring delivery.

"Magnificent" says Carol Klein (Gardeners' World 9.8.13) "One of the best Sweet Peas. I wouldn't be without it in my garden"
- Monty Don

Spring delivery.

5 plants for £20 10 for £30

Tree Stocks.

Magnificently floriferous and highly scented, it's like having a perfumery in your garden. A beautiful shrubby perennial, forming a mini-trunk, to support grey evergreen leaves and spikes of overwhelmingly scented pure white flowers. Plant some under a window and escape to heaven. Grows to just 30 inches. **5 plants for £17.50**
10 plants for £25

Gertrude's Everlasting Sweet Peas



***"This is one of
my favourite
perennial
peas"***
**Christine
Walkden**
(TV gardener)

"Good quality plants well grown. The plants tell their own story" - Christine Walkden. See the video and our full range at: plantworld.org.uk

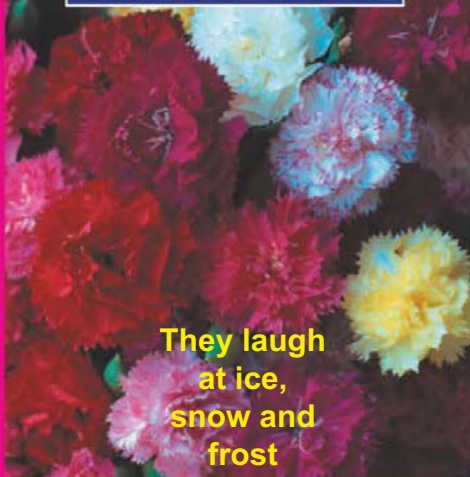
Grow Gertrude's Jekyll's favourite blooms... Everlasting Sweet Peas.

Hardy perennials - they thrive through ice and snow, re-growing each year. Plant them once and you have them for life.

Plant these beauties and enjoy perennial blooms year-after-year. They were often used by the great gardener Gertrude Jekyll to train on canes and fencing or encouraged to ramble over hedges. Gertrude was an artist and garden designer - part of the Arts and Crafts movement. She loved the warm colours of Everlasting Sweet Peas, which she often included in her hardy flower beds. She wrote numerous books, including *Colour in the Flower Garden*, and created 400 gardens worldwide. Enjoy strong magenta pink, pure white, scarlet and others, supplied as a delightful mixture.

6 plants for £20 12 plants for £30

Iron Stem Carnations



These are the 'cut and come again' carnation, producing a colourful display of button-hole blooms but so easy to grow! Fragrant blooms every year, without replanting. Mixed colours include reds, white, yellows, rose, lavender and orange. Grow 20in tall. These are a very strong-stemmed variety which, unusually for carnations, are entirely winter hardy. Hardy Iron Stem Carnations can be grown outside all-year-round, producing armfuls of seasonal delicious blooms. Say 'no thanks' to florist bills - now you can be self sufficient in blooms for the house or as gifts for friends. No greenhouse or heating needed!

10 for £16.50 20 for £25.

Your Name:..... Tel no:..... AG8
 Your Address:.....
 Post Code:.....
 e-mail (if any)
 Please send me:.....

 TOTAL + £4.50 P&P = £ Cheque/PO enclosed.
 payable to PLANTWORLD or charge my **card number** below

Start /	Expiry /	Your Signature:	Issue no. Maestro
Last 3 numbers on signature panel on back of card.			

Plantworld

**P&P £4.50 to
total order**

Please quote
ref. AG8

To order by phone call: 01245 327110 online: plantworld.org.uk

Cheques/PO's: PLANTWORLD (Dept AG8), Burnham Road, South Woodham, Chelmsford, Essex, CM3 5QP

or send the coupon above

Reader offer

From *Thompson & Morgan*

Bumper annuals

Avoid the hassle of seed sowing and fill your garden with colour all summer with this bumper collection of plug plants

THIS collection of fabulous annuals contains all you need to make your beds, borders, patios and baskets look amazing this season. We've done the hard work for you and grown the plants from seed, so all you need to do when your plug plants arrive is pot them up in multipurpose compost and grow them on

for planting out in late spring. Height: Up to 24in (60cm). Spread: Up to 18in (45cm).

■ Buy 6 of any variety for £4.99

■ Buy the Annual 'Best Value Bumper' Collection of **72 plugs** (6 of each variety) for **£19.99** (RRP £71.88) – **SAVE £51.89**

Save
£51.89



Verbena 'Quartz Mixed' F1 Hybrid – A carefully selected mix of early flowering, brightly coloured verbenas with excellent mildew resistance for a guaranteed long lasting display.



Begonia 'Lotto Mixed'
An exceptionally large flowered variety. Excellent for bedding.



Salpiglossis 'Royale Mixed' F1 Hybrid
Stunning velvety trumpet flowers on upright, bushy plants.



Salvia 'Blaze of Fire'
Brilliant scarlet flowers above compact plants. One of our best sellers.



Petunia 'Easy Wave™ Improved Mixed'
Containing over 20 types of petunia flowers which are always dazzling, come rain or shine.



Lobelia 'Monsoon Midnight'
Producing a cascade of sapphire flowers, this trailing Lobelia is ideal for hanging baskets and containers.



Rudbeckia 'All Sorts Mixed'
These robust coneflowers give an outstanding performance, and the long-lasting blooms make excellent cut flowers.



Pushalong spreaders

Want to get your lawn in top shape? Consumer editor **Julia Heaton** reports on spreaders that will help

LAWNS need feeding and from time to time may also require seed to repair bare patches and to thicken up the sward. For accurate placement of fertiliser and seed it's best to use a spreader.

Broadcast types spin their contents out in a wide arc, covering the area quickly but requiring care to ensure no

areas are overlapped or missed. However we've gone for the pushalong, drop models where materials fall through an aperture in the base, making it easier to spread a uniform application of either fertiliser or seeds.

In order to save time repeatedly filling the hopper, choose one with a capacity that reflects the size of your lawn.

Tip:
Always empty the hopper after use, rinse with cold water and wipe completely dry before storing.



Drury



Score
14/15

Cobra HS30

£29.99 RRP. Free UK mainland delivery

Cobra on-line store or stockists

☎ **0115 986 6646**

🌐 **cobragarden.co.uk**

Features ★★★★★

With a 66lb (30kg) capacity, this lightweight drop spreader has a steel frame plus hopper and wheels made of heavy-duty polymer. Spreading width is 18in (45cm) making it suitable for medium to large lawns.

Performance ★★★★★

Took 39 minutes to put together the 45 parts, screws and bolts for which a screw driver and spanner were required. The result was a stable unit, easy to fill and a nice handle height. We loved the settings lever being mounted on the handle – no need to bend. Gave precise application.

Value ★★★★★

Remarkable price for the quality.



Score
12/15

Evergreen Easy Lawn Spreader

£24 RRP. + £5 delivery

B&Q

☎ **0333 014 3098** for enquiries

🌐 **diy.com** for store locator/online shop

Features ★★★★★

Lightweight 26 lb (12kg) capacity spreader with spreading width of 14in (35cm) – suitable for small lawns. Calibration is via a lever on the hopper and a chart gives settings for Evergreen and Scotts fertilisers.

Performance ★★★★★

Tool-free assembly was a doddle, just added the wheels, handle plus parking stand and five minutes later it was ready to work. Being lightweight is an advantage until it comes to filling – a slight breeze toppled the empty unit over. Settings from 1 to 9 gave accurate application.

Value ★★★★★

Good value and can't fault the mechanism. Shame the spreader isn't sturdier.



Score
13/15

Spyker Drop Spreader P70-12010

£597.76 RRP. + £4.95 P&P

Central Spares

☎ **01202 882000**

🌐 **centralspares.co.uk** for stockists

Features ★★★★★

Two-section metal hopper with 120lbs (54.4kg) capacity and the option of variable rate or fixed rate applications. Powder-coated steel frame and pneumatic-tyred wheels. Spreading width 36in (1m) or 18in (45cm) if running one section of the hopper. Weight: 65lbs (29.5kg).

Performance ★★★★★

Assembly took two of us nearly an hour – yet was a dream to use, the wide air-filled tyres leaving no marks, covering the ground really quickly and offering an impressive spreading width. Ideal for large lawns. Even takes into account how fast you walk.

Value ★★★★★

Google it to see where you can get it cheaper.

Next Week: Bell cloche's to give your plants weather protection whenever they need it

Earthway 7350SU Residential Drop Spreader

£89.94 RRP + £12.60 delivery

DMMP Ltd

☎ 01455 825400 for orders/stockists

🌐 dmmp.co.uk

Amateur Gardening
Best buy!
15/15



Features ★★★★★

Sturdy unit with steel frame and a poly hopper providing 22in (56cm) spreading width in a single pass and having a capacity of 75lbs (34kg). A handle-mounted gauge and lever gives complete control of application rate. Package includes an easy-to-follow rate calculator to assist in setting the spreader for granular products.

Performance ★★★★★

Couldn't better this for assembly – it was just a matter of lifting it out of the box, positioning the handle and tightening two wing nuts. Sitting very stable on the ground, and with a broad and wide hopper, this spreader was easy to fill and in use produced a perfect drop pattern. The 8in (20cm) wheels proved grippy, aiding traction when pushing the unit, but sufficiently broad that they left little indentation on the lawn.

Value ★★★★★

It's quite a jump in price from the Evergreen and Cobra, but there's no fiddly assembly and this one comes with a five year guarantee whereas the others have only one year.

Mother's Day gifts

Make her day extra special

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Left to its own devices the foxglove tree can reach 39ft (12m) but coppicing it every spring keeps it in check and encourages it to produce huge, dramatic leaves

Learn a new technique: Coppicing

With clever pruning tricks, you can grow plants that would normally be too large for most gardens, says **Paul Williams**

COPPICING – and pollarding – are pruning techniques that go way back in time. Their main use was for the production of wood ‘crops’, but the same methods can be applied to garden plants to create striking ornamental foliage effects in the garden.

One advantage of both methods is that they allow you to enjoy the decorative features of some otherwise too-large shrubs or trees by controlling their size so that they will fit into a small garden. For example *Salix alba* varieties with bright coloured stems can grow to 32ft (10m) or more high, but when coppiced they can be kept as short as 3–6ft (1–2m) making them

suitable for small gardens.

Let’s look at coppicing first of all. If you are not a confident pruner you will love this because you cut every shoot down to one or two inches from the base with practically no thinking involved.

Getting started

The most common subjects for coppicing are varieties of the white willow (*Salix alba*) and the red-stemmed dogwood (*Cornus alba*). Both produce brilliant stem colours on young, one-year-old shoots, so by cutting hard back each year a new flush of brightly coloured stems is produced. If you are starting from scratch with a new plant, prepare the ground well and give the plant two summers to get established before you hard prune. This allows it to develop a strong root system so you will get much stronger new shoots. Pruning needs to take place in late winter just before the leaves start to appear, so you can enjoy the coloured stems through the autumn and winter.

You might not like the bareness of cutting back all the stems and having to start from ground level each spring. If so just cut half of the stems back the first year, then each year cut back the two year old shoots.

Over the years the plant will develop a

congestion of stubby shoots at the base. It will be beneficial to occasionally cut out these clusters completely – you will probably need a pruning saw rather than loppers to do this.

Buds hidden deep in the base of the plant will shoot to replace what you have sawn out.

Each year you are removing a lot of plant material so feed and mulch well in the spring to nourish the plant and get

“It can encourage plants to produce massive leaves”

the greatest amount of new growth. If you have the space, grow two or three plants together some 3ft (1m) apart so you get a greater density of bright winter shoots.

Pollarding is carried out for different reasons to coppicing and needs a bit more consideration before you start work. It is often used to control the size of large trees. Big branches are removed and new shoots sprout from the cut ends. This work needs professional skills and is beyond the scope of the gardener but what the gardener can do is pollard large garden shrubs or young



Indian bean trees (catalpa) can be grown in small gardens if they are pollarded each spring

Coppicing

■ Coppicing involves cutting down a tree or shrub to near ground level to produce long, straight shoots. Traditionally this was for making hazel wattle hurdles but in the garden it’s for ornamental effect. Cut back stems annually, or every two or three years.



cap

TopTip

Much older, larger trees can be cut back but often look a little awkward. For the best look, start pollarding when plants are two to four years old.

GAP

Eucalyptus gunnii and *E. perriniana* respond well to pollarding. The young foliage of this traditional florist's foliage plant is a different shape to mature adult foliage

trees that have outgrown their space or need rejuvenating. This involves cutting back the older, thicker stems. They can be cut as low as a few inches from the ground for a coppice like effect, or a couple of feet up the stem or trunk to encourage growth lower down. Large berberis nine or ten feet high respond well to this treatment and can be cut down to a foot in late winter.

Most deciduous shrubs are suitable for this treatment including, buddleia, deutzia, cornus, corylus, leycasteria, philadelphus and cotinus. They will throw up a thicket of vigorous shoots in the spring and where necessary, stronger, well-placed and evenly spaced shoots should be encouraged by pruning out the less well placed shoots. I would not try to thin out berberis shoots unless you have masochistic tendencies (they are thorny). Let the shoots grow up and then cut back hard again in a few years time. Apart from using pollarding as a

maintenance technique it can be used to produce dramatic effects in the garden by encouraging plants to produce outsized leaves. I am a great fan of foliage and creating a lush jungle effect using hardy plants and pollarding is a very good way of doing this.

Pruning for large leaves

There is a range of trees that, if they are pollarded rather than being allowed to grow up, produce big leaves. While not quite the size of dustbin lids these are certainly bigger than the biggest dinner plates. Try *Catalpa bignonioides* (Indian bean tree), *liriodendron* (tulip tree), *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy' – and my favourite *Paulownia tomentosa*, the foxglove tree, which takes pride of place in my backyard jungle. You have to realise that these big leaves come at the expense of flowers. The shoots never become mature enough to flower but with most trees that is a small sacrifice.

My experiment with the foxglove tree had surprising results. The first time I cut it back (the trunk was about two inches in diameter at chest height) I cut it right down to four inches and it produced three shoots which went up a staggering 13ft (4m) in one season! The leaves were gigantic but it looked ridiculous. I have since cut it back less severely allowing a few more buds to develop which dissipates some of its energy and the shoots are a more reasonable 4ft (1.5m) long but the leaves are still big. ■

Pollarding

■ Pollarding is used to keep shrubs or trees to a size suitable to their site. It usually means cutting back regularly to a short trunk or side branches, so some plants look like coppices on a stick. It is also useful for rejuvenating oversized and leggy shrubs.



GAP

Try it!

5 plants to prune

Cotinus coggygia

Both the green and purple leaved varieties of the smoke bush produce vigorous shoots with very large, palm sized leaves when cut back hard in spring.



GAP

Catalpa

The huge heart-shaped leaves of both golden and purple varieties of Indian bean tree make bold features when pollarded, and ideal partners for tall grasses like *Molinia caerulea*.



GAP

Cornus

The stems of *Cornus alba* 'Sibirica' (red) and *Cornus sericea* 'Flaviramea' (bright yellow) cheer up winter months. *Cornus alba* 'Aurea' has lovely yellow leaves in summer.



Shutterstock

Sambucus 'Black Beauty'

The pretty pink flowers on this dark-leaved elderberry are produced on new shoots, but leaving some shoots unpruned will give more flowers.



GAP

Salix alba 'Britzensis'

A bit of a mouthful to pronounce but probably the brightest and best of all for winter effect in the small garden. Underplant with snowdrops, and winter aconites.



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Performance ★★★★★
The best of both worlds: the two large pockets accommodate lots of bits and there are smaller, tighter-fitting pouches for shears. It feels very comfortable and moulds easily to your body. The placement of the belt buckle, right next to the top of the apron, was handy and made it stronger, while being able to attach the shed keys was a useful extra.

Value ★★★★★
Extremely well made, hard-wearing and attractive - the white stitching against brown suede looks great. Also included in the price is the option to have a name added to the belt for a personal touch.

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Your letters

with Jenny Bagshaw



Write to: Jenny Bagshaw, Amateur Gardening Westover House, West Quay Road, Poole, Dorset BH15 1JG or email: amateurgardening@timeinc.com

New year, new look

WELL done AG, you've done it again. Your new look magazine is like a breath of fresh air, sunshine and rainbows all mixed together. I truly liked everything as it was before but somehow you seem to have the magic ingredient to just keep on improving.

Amateur Gardening should be prescribed by the NHS, and given to all politicians and world leaders with instructions to follow your advice on how to take care, nurture and enjoy what is put before us; mixed with a spadeful of respect, thoughtfulness and understanding and then we'd all benefit.

It might also be a good idea if you could give them a lesson in humour and teamwork! Thanks AG for giving us a fresh outlook on life.

Carol Neal, Great Glen, Leics



Star Letter

Jenny says... We're pleased to say we've had a lot of nice comments about our new look. And if readers could see how much AG has changed since the first issue came out in May 1884, we think they'd be stunned.

Readers Quick Tips



If you're having trouble with pigeons eating your newly planted greens, try putting a few large plastic or rubber snakes in the vegetable garden.

It not only prevents pigeons from feeding on your greens, it also deters birds from pulling up seedlings and rabbits from munching everything in sight! You do need to move them around occasionally though – even the birds aren't stupid!

Mrs Judy Berrow, Chaddesley Corbett, Worcs

The dramatic colours of sunrise



I PURCHASED this beautiful Silver Birch (*Betula* 'Snow Queen') over five years ago with vouchers I won from AG. And I took this picture in early February as the sun rose because the colours were so beautiful behind its bare branches.

We hang feeders filled with sunflower seeds plus fat balls from it to help the birds survive the winter. We only have a tiny back garden but it's packed with a lot

of bushes, shrubs and trees which provide cover for the wild birds.

We get blue tits, great tits, sparrows, goldfinches, starlings, blackbirds, collared doves, wood pigeons, a robin, a wren and warblers in the summertime, so in a small way we're helping to conserve our feathered friends.

Heather Overfield, Cottingham, East Yorks

Birdsong is falling silent in gardens

GARDEN BIRDS like the song thrush, starling and house sparrow are becoming less common, a report claims. More than one quarter of UK bird species are in need of urgent help to prevent further decline in numbers, according to the study, called *Birds of Conservation Concern 4*. The report is an assessment of the status of all the UK's 244 bird species compiled by a coalition of the nation's leading bird conservation groups. It shows that the



"The number of birds on the 'red list' is growing" number of birds on the at-risk 'red list' is growing. The song thrush, starling

Apart from loss of habitat, the report suggests that climate change may also be responsible for declines of highest conservation concern in the UK," explained RSPB's conservation director, Martin Harper

My call to action

I FOUND it very sad reading the article 'Birdsong is falling silent in gardens' (AG News 16 Jan). Some of the best natural habitats left for wildlife seem to be in churchyards these days.

I'm sure that all the building sites don't help, with trees and hedges being ripped up and natural habitats being destroyed. Even our more common feathered friends seem to be on the decline, but I remain impressed with the dawn chorus so there must still be many birds around. They just need the encouragement to visit our gardens by planting more trees and shrubs.

I think there should be another 'Plant a tree' campaign like the one in 1973. After all, after 40 years I wonder how many of them are still standing. I think we should all do our little bit by planting something for the birds, however small a garden we have.

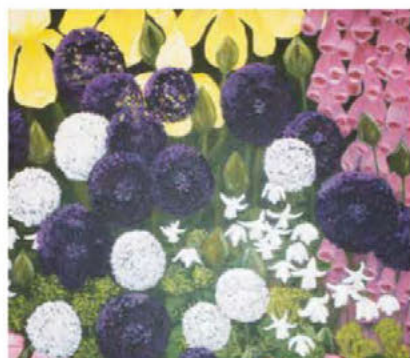
Sylvia Monk, Takeley, Herts



Our Star Letter wins £40 in National Garden Gift Vouchers; tip of the week, £10; other letters £5 (£10 if we use a photo you've sent).



Vouchers can be bought and redeemed at over 2,000 UK outlets offering more than 90,000 garden plants and products. Visit thevouchergarden.co.uk for details.



Inspirational AG

I LOVE my gardening magazine and reading about other people's ideas and thoughts, so I thought I'd share how my garden inspires me to paint.

The garden and the artwork are very therapeutic and rewarding, and though I might not achieve a masterpiece I can lose myself in both.

For me they're truly good for the soul. I'm currently enjoying painting the seasons and have titled this one 'Early June at Ffynnonwen'.

Eve Kemp-Gee, Penybont, Carmarthen

It's Alexander Beetle!

I WAS really pleased that I managed to take this picture of a rosemary beetle on my i-Phone as I think it has such an amazing iridescent colouring on its back.

I'm an amateur gardener and love getting the magazine as it's packed with lots of useful information and articles and well worth the money.

Jackie Rice, Beckenham, Kent

Jenny says... Rosemary beetles are also known to attack lavender, sage and thyme, and both the adult beetles and the larvae feed on the foliage and flowers. Either pick the pests off by hand or spray with Provado Ultimate Bug Killer Ready To Use to protect your plants.



Digi
pic of the
week

Spring's started



EVERYTHING has begun early this year.

Frogs started mating here in Dorchester on 4 January and since then, spawn has appeared everywhere! This picture was taken on 7 February and you can clearly see the spawn that's resulted from the early mating in our wildlife pond.

Mrs Crysta Pickersgill, Dorchester, Dorset

An essential childhood friend

AT the end of last summer we moved house and now have a much bigger garden, so I'm looking forward to planting up lots of different kinds of veg, salads and flowers.

Best of all though, Benjamin my seven year-old is now able to have the pet he's always longed for - and here he is with his beloved 'Ginny the Guinea'.

Mrs Lucy Travell, Barnwood, Gloucs



Keep 'em peeled



BURGLARS beware! I think this must be the perfect sign for most of us gardeners.

Mrs Jodie Giblin, Penarth, South Wales

Amateur Gardening Meet the team!

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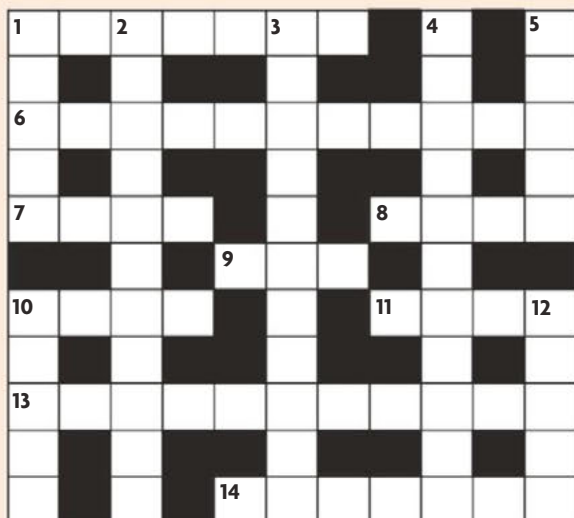
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Gardener's Tea break



Crossword ...just for fun!

ACROSS

1 'White _____' (a variety of 11 across) – the female tiger! (7)

6 With evergreen purple foliage, this shrub produces pink, witch hazel-like flowers from late-winter to mid-spring (11)

7 *Hemerocallis* 'Victoria _____', the seaport (and the largest city of Yemen) (4)

8 Partially carbonised vegetable matter saturated with water, in its processed state used in potting composts (4)

9 *Asplenium bulbiferum* is also known as the ____ and chickens fern (3)

10 and **13** across AG's new fruit and veg expert (see pages 14–15) (4,11)

11 The Japanese maple genus (4)

13 See **10** across

14 Substance distilled from a plant, containing its characteristic properties in

concentrated form, as in the hosta varieties '_____ of Summer' and 'Warwick _____' (7)

DOWN

1 The lime tree genus (5)

2 Something to sit on outside! (6,5)

3 Plants of the sunflower-like genus *helenium* (the flowers of which cause some people to emit air suddenly and audibly through the nose and mouth by involuntary, spasmodic action! (11)

4 One of the common names for laburnum (6, 5)

5 *Hemerocallis* '_____ Flash', the sky-high object! (5)

10 This semi-double lilac-pink variety of floribunda bush rose has good fortune! (5)

12 This is a good time of year to wash and _____ your pots and trays (5)

CROSSWORD ANSWERS
ACROSS 1 Tiger 6 Loropetalum 7 Aden 8 Peat 9 Hen 10 Lucy 11 Acer 13 Chamberlain 14 Essence
DOWN 1 Tilia 2 Garden chair 3 Sneezeweeds 4 Golden chain 5 Comet 10 Lucky 12 Rinse

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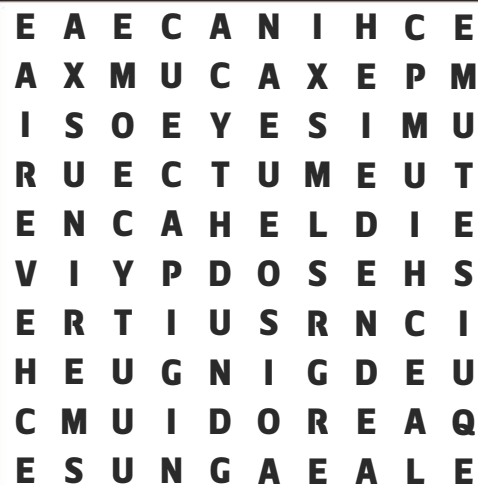
Send your name and address on the back of a postcard to Gro-Sure Sow Smart Draw, Amateur Gardening, Westover House, West Quay Road, Poole, Dorset BH15 1JG. Or you can email your details to ag_giveaway@timeinc.com, heading the email Gro-Sure Sow Smart Draw. The closing date is: 29 February 2016.



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Wordsearch

This word search comprises plant names and gardening terms beginning with the letter 'E'. They are listed below; in the grid they may be read across, backwards, up, down or diagonally. Letters may be shared between words. Erroneous or duplicate words may appear in the grid, but there is only one correct solution. After the listed words are found there are 10 letters remaining; arrange these to make this week's KEYWORD.



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ECHIUM
EDEN
EDGING
ELAEAGNUS
ENSETE
EPIEDIUM
EQUISETUM
ERINUS
ERODIUM
EXACUM
EXOCHORDA
EYES

HOW TO ENTER: Enter this week's keyword on the entry form, and send it to AG Word Search No 302, Amateur Gardening, Westover House, West Quay Road, Poole, Dorset BH15 1JG, to arrive by Weds 9 March, 2016. The first correct entry chosen at random will win our £30 cash prize.

No:
302

This week's Keyword is

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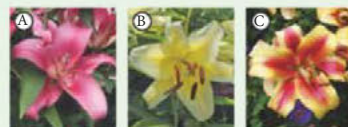
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To create texture and interest and mimic heather's natural moorland environment, plant different varieties of erica and calluna together

TopTip

Sprinkle general purpose fertiliser around the base of heathers early in the season; don't allow the soil to dry out in summer

Grow heathers

all year round

Don't cast heathers off as old fashioned, says **Hazel Sillver** – planted in the right way, they can look very modern!

COME August, heather clothes the moors of the UK in gorgeous purple swathes, and it provides shelter and food for wildlife such as bees. This native flower is especially significant in Scotland, where it's known as 'Ling' and regarded as a symbol of luck.

But in the gardening world, poor old heather gets a bad rap. Associated with the rock gardens of the 1970s, it is often considered as unappealing as conifers – too old fashioned, too naff. Yet seen in a different light, heather is a valuable plant in the garden – and it can look modern!

Winter cool

At the moment, of course, the winter-flowering species are at their best. They include *Erica carnea* (in bloom from early winter) and *Erica x darleyensis* (in bloom from late autumn). Being good sports, they will tolerate any soil pH, proving that you don't have to garden on acidic sand to enjoy heathers! And neither of them has to look like a 1970s flashback...

In the past decade several winter gardens

have been created or modernised, and winter heathers have been given pride of place within their contemporary planting schemes. In the Winter Walk at RHS Harlow Carr in North Yorkshire, for instance, *Erica carnea* shines beside coppery grasses, ghostly Russian sage and white birch; and in the Bressingham Winter Gardens in Norfolk, a mosaic of winter heathers blooms next to blazing red and orange dogwoods. These modern gardens are proof that heather has kissed goodbye to its tea-cosy image.

In the average garden, winter-flowering heathers can be dotted about to provide a splash of colour during the cold months. If you want to ensure they look modern, be careful what you plant them next to – aside a dark, dreary conifer, for instance, they could be in danger of being a dowdy reminder of the 1970s. But alongside grasses (such as *Carex testacea*) or fiery stems of dogwood, winter heathers take on a modern shine.

But heathers don't just bloom in winter. With the right gaggle of species in the garden, you could have heather in bloom

Heathers make fantastic container plants. Give them centre stage and plant them solo



all year long!

The Irish heath (*E. erigena*) begins to do its thing in spring – being a Mediterranean plant, it is not as hardy as *E. x darleyensis* or *E. carnea*, but if damaged in a freezing winter, it will grow back. And it earns its place: having good height, it's useful in the border and, just like the winter heathers, it tolerates any soil pH. Another spring-blooming group is the tree heathers, which (unlike the rest) get big! They are shrubs, rather than trees, reaching more than 4ft (1.5m) and producing flowers.

To back these two up, the winter-flowering heathers (*E. carnea* or *E. x darleyensis*) will still be going strong into late spring. If you would like some spring flowers to show them off with, consider planting them with bulbs, such as narcissus or scilla. Alternatively, you might plant such

Top 5 Winter & spring varieties

Erica x darleyensis 'Kramer's Rote'

Coppery green foliage smothered in bold magenta flowers from December to May. Will grow in any free-draining soil. H. 13in (35cm).



Erica x darleyensis 'White Perfection'

Erect stems of pure white flowers from December to April. Will grow in any free-draining soil in full sun. H. 13in (35cm).



Erica carnea 'Foxhollow'

Golden-green foliage blushes copper in winter; between January and April, it produces delicate pink flowers. Happy in any soil pH. H. 4in (10cm).



Calluna vulgaris 'Firefly'

Pink flowers in late summer, but also grown for its bronze foliage which takes on fiery shades of orange-red in winter. Needs acid soil. H. 5in (15cm).



Erica 'Ghost Hills'

Covered in pale pink flowers from late winter to mid-spring, which provide a vital source of early nectar for bees and other pollinators. H. 19in (50cm).



This low-growing plant looks its best when grown in big swathes snaking through in a border

bulbs amongst summer or autumn-flowering heathers, to provide some show during their quiet months.

Summer species

As the weather warms into summer, the acid-loving heathers come into flower. There are several species: one of the first off the mark in June is bell heather (*Erica cinerea*), which produces brightly coloured bells into early autumn. Then, in mid-summer, the Cornish heath (*E. vagans*) performs – also producing flowers that continue into autumn. It will tolerate slightly heavier soils than most heathers, and (unusually for a summer species) it will grow in slightly alkaline soil.

Finally, as the late summer swelter hits, the good old Ling heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) begins to bloom. There are endless garden varieties of Ling to grow at home, in different colours, shapes and sizes; but all demand an acid soil. If you don't have a high pH – for example if you garden on chalk – consider growing summer heathers in containers filled with ericaceous compost. They don't require enormous pots – as long as the drainage is excellent but they are regularly watered, they will be happy.

Being evergreen, and having several species flowering in every season, isn't it time that we fell back in love with heathers? In the small garden, they are indispensable. ■

How to grow



Planting

Heathers love light, free-draining soil; if you garden on heavy soil, dig in lots of compost before planting.



Soil type

As a general rule of thumb, winter varieties will grow in any pH. Summer heathers usually need acid soil.

Site

Plant in full sun; heathers will not flower as well, nor develop colourful foliage, in semi-shade.



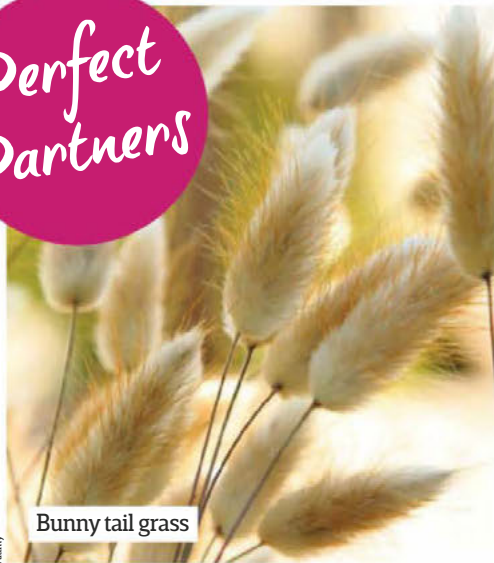
Pruning

Most (except *E. carnea*) like an annual haircut after flowering, once risk of frost has passed.



What to grow with heathers

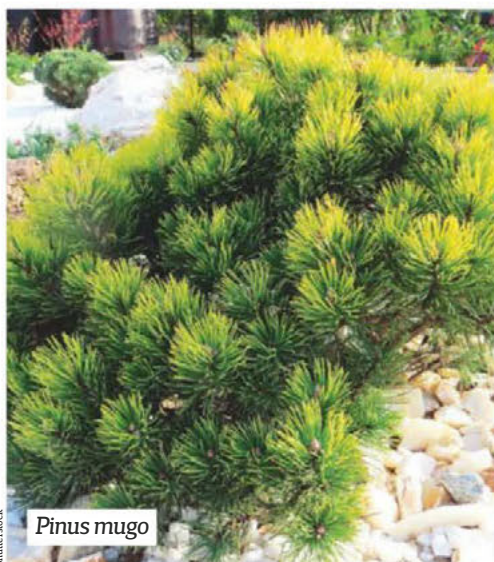
Perfect Partners



Bunny tail grass

Ornamental grasses

Heathers flower alongside grasses like *molinia* and *fescue* in their native heathlands, so team summer-flowering heathers up with annual grasses like *briza media*, *lagurus* (bunny tail grass) and *hordeum* (foxtail barley) as well as strappy grasses, like *carex* and *festuca* to create an elegant, naturalistic look. The wine-red blooms of autumn heathers, such as *Calluna vulgaris* 'Dark Beauty' and *Erica cinerea* 'Velvet Night' combine beautifully with the green-gold tints of grasses, such as *Molinia caerulea*. And heathers with red winter foliage (such as *Calluna vulgaris* 'Firefly') are striking with the red-tinted grass *Hakonechloa macra*.



Pinus mugo

Pines and other evergreens

Heathers can look great with dwarf pines (*Pinus mugo* 'Ophir' or 'Winter Gold'), but go easy on the conifers if you want to avoid that 1970s feel! Also remember that heathers need full sun so be careful of trees and shrubs casting too much shade. For a modern look try a white-flowering heather with a dwarf glaucous juniper (such as *Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Star'), which looks good with a palette of silver, and violet evergreens such as *Stachys byzantina* and *Hebe pinguifolia* 'Pagei'. Mix pink winter-flowering heathers with burgundy-leaved evergreens, such as *Bergenia* 'Ballawley' and silver evergreens, such as *Artemisia* 'Boughton Silver'.

Perennials and bulbs

Gorse is heather's natural partner, but there is a whole host of other flowering plants that blend well with them. In late winter and early spring, a scene of white heathers, snowdrops and scilla is enchanting. Later in the season, you could try combining heathers with modern perennials in the front to mid border – for example *Calluna vulgaris* 'Kirby White' with *Salvia nemorosa* 'Ostfriesland' (purple-blue), and *Daboecia* 'William Buchanan' (a crimson-flowered heather relative). At the front of the border, pink heathers look great with purple or pink perennials and bulbs, such as *Pulsatilla vulgaris*, *Geranium cinereum* and *erigeron*.



Heather and gorse in Somerset

Top 4 Summer varieties

Erica cinerea 'Eden Valley'

This floppy, prostrate bell heather would suit a cottage garden. Lavender-pink and white flowers persist from June to September above green foliage. Prefers acid, well-drained soil in sun. H. 7in (20cm).



Erica vagans 'Mrs D F Maxwell'

This fabulous Cornish heath produces cheery pink flowers from mid-summer atop dark green foliage. Plant in free-draining acid or slightly alkaline soil. H. 9in (25cm).



Calluna vulgaris 'Silver Queen'

This gorgeous heather has evergreen downy-silver foliage all year round and lavender flowers in late summer and autumn. Grow in acid soil. H. 15in (40cm).



Calluna vulgaris 'County Wicklow'

Generous, double, light pink blooms coat the green foliage of this pretty, compact Irish variety, from late summer into October. Prefers acidic well-drained soil. H. 9in (25cm).



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The Farha's green roof helps reduce emissions created by their boiler. "It's constructed from an egg box-like system and topped with soil in which sedums and sempervivums grow," Alfred explains. A wildlife pond and scores of trees also add to the garden's environmentally friendly credentials



Welcome to wildlife garden

Wendy and Alfred Farha have reached new planting heights in their eco-friendly plot

GARDENING has been taken to a higher plane by Wendy and Alfred Farha who have made their one acre Oxfordshire plot as environmentally friendly as possible, even covering a flat roof with a mat of sedum. Not only is this eco feature attractive it's also popular with insects, helps to counter balance emissions from the property's heating system and performs an insulating function to boot.

"The house is big and we wanted to find ways to reduce its impact on the environment," explains Alfred. "The flat roof covers our boiler room and study and the temperature is consistent all year round." Alongside its practical role, the 'green roof' is now a great spot from where

"Nature has taught me so much"

the couple like to enjoy unbeatable views over the tree-rich garden, including its wildlife pond, which is alive with amphibians and insects.

"The overall concept for the garden is to ensure plenty of ground cover so we're not losing soil quality and moisture. This then complements the mid-range shrubs and tree canopies, which I like to raise so that sunlight can come in underneath," says Wendy. "I try not to water very much and I

don't spray. I do lose things because of this but on the plus side I get a lot of wildlife that I wouldn't have had if I used chemicals."

Practical considerations aside, Wendy's background lies in the arts so she treats the garden at Field Cottage like a canvas, creating her own colour combinations, while simultaneously allowing nature to have its say. "In a garden like this you have to play the mediator really," she says. "Especially as there are some things here that want to take over, like bullies in a school yard."

Harnessing her artistic skills she has also created wildlife-friendly additions including an insect hotel made from recycled materials and a water feature that casts a blue glow over the pond at night. ■



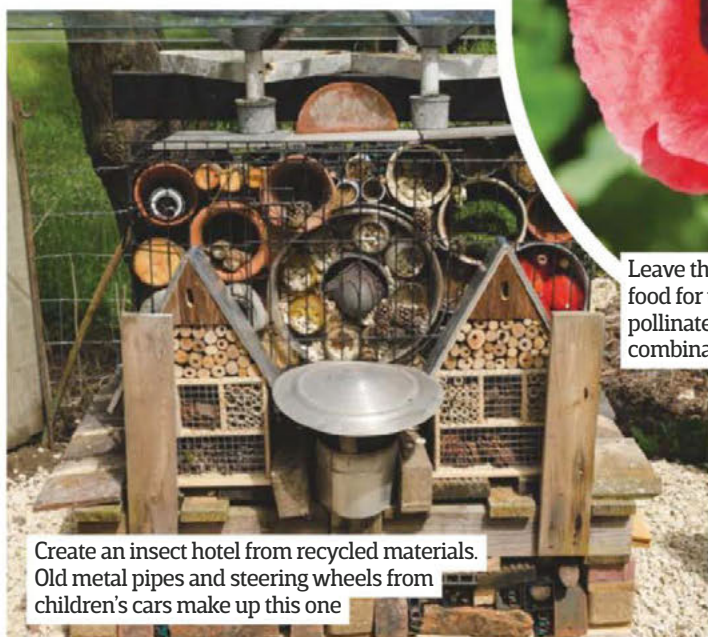
Lift tree canopies to let in more light for colourful plants that are able to grow in the partial shade below



Sow foxgloves for insect-friendly flowers that thrive in the shade.



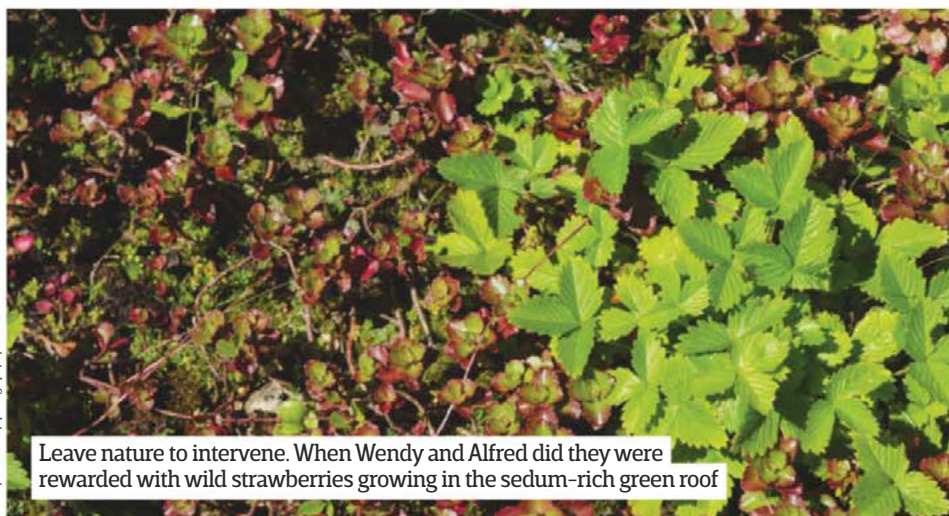
Leave the seedheads of poppies as winter food for the birds. "Poppies also cross pollinate, so we end up with all sorts of combinations," adds Wendy



Create an insect hotel from recycled materials. Old metal pipes and steering wheels from children's cars make up this one



Attract a variety of insects and amphibians with a wildlife pond



Leave nature to intervene. When Wendy and Alfred did they were rewarded with wild strawberries growing in the sedum-rich green roof

Meet the owner

OWNER Wendy and Alfred Farha

ADDRESS Field Cottage, Fritwell Road, Fewcott, Bicester, OX27 7NZ

GARDEN SIZE One acre

ASPECT North-east facing

SOIL Limestone-rich, alkaline

VISITED June

SPECIAL FEATURES Wildlife-friendly eco garden containing a variety of trees, shrubs and perennials, along with a wildlife pond, insect hotel and green roof.



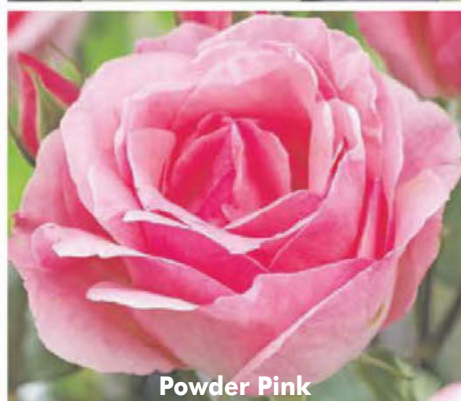
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When sowing seeds, it always pays to use a fresh bag of compost

Compost conundrum

There are many ways to save money in the garden, but skimping on quality compost isn't one of them, says **Toby**

WITH austerity never far from the headlines, I've found some simple money-saving tips that could save the cash-savvy gardener almost £15.63 a year!

Simply going to bed earlier can save a fortune on garden lighting and if you're sick of splashing out on expensive string why not use old dental floss instead? It's just as strong and it's mint-scented, too!

My favourite way to save is siphoning off

"It's tempting to drag out last year's bag of multi-purpose"

and storing bath water for use on the garden. According to water companies this can save you literally pennies! All you need is a hosepipe and a £250 plastic tank and every 13 baths you'll swim in a whopping saving of £1.98. You'd be a fool not to!

These gold-dust (and real) tips aside, there are some things it doesn't pay to skimp on. Now that the potting bench is waking from its winter slumber it's always tempting to drag out last year's old bag of multi-purpose and use for first sowings.

This often ends in disaster as, like food in the fridge, compost 'goes off', changing its chemical composition and ability to drain. It turns into a very challenging place for seeds to survive.

This is especially true of reduced-peat and peat-free formulations which, as they decompose, not only become airless but can swamp seeds with nutrients that actually inhibit germination.

Toby's top tips



■ Keep compost in a dry place. If bags become wet inside, nutrients start to dissolve and won't be there for the roots.



■ Fresh multi-purpose compost is fine for sowing seeds but sieve it first to remove any lumps and bumps.

That doesn't mean you have to throw old bags out though, as they're fine for potting up less fussy established plants or topping-up containers. Talking of which, when it comes to compost, you always get what you pay for. Bags sold in three-for-£10 deals might look like a bargain but often lack the slow-release fertiliser to see them through the summer.

That's why I blend cheaper multi-purpose with bags of more expensive John Innes No3 to make a mix that clings onto nutrients and makes plants in permanent pots more self-sufficient.

It might not save money but it certainly saves a lot of time looking after them.

TLC for pot plants

Boost container plants by replacing some compost. Tip out the rootball and tease the top 3-5in (7.5-13cm) of earth from the top and bottom of the rootball. Pot-on, or put back in the original pot with fresh compost. Add slow-release fertiliser (right).



